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A Motor-Scout in Flanders



'MONSIEUR,' SAID VON HIEGLER IN HIS ATROCIOUS FRENCH,
'I CALL UPON YOU TO SURRENDER'"

A Motor-Scout in Flanders

Or, Held by the Enemy

BY

CAPTAIN CHARLES GILSON

Illustrated by F. Gillett

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A MOTOR-SCOUT IN FLANDERS

CHAPTER I

Captain von Hiegler

THE German legions had fallen back from the neighbourhood of Paris. From Mons to the very outskirts of the French capital the armies of the Kaiser had followed up the retirement of the allied forces under General Joffre. The German advance had been held in check by the brilliant tactics of the British generals, whilst the French commander-in-chief disposed his forces on the southern bank of the Marne.

There the tables were turned. The Germans, weakened by heavy casualties and fatiguing marches, were obliged to fall back in disorder. From General Head-quarters to every brigade in the allied armies, the order was sent to follow up the German retreat, to push forward in the greatest haste.

Late on an autumn afternoon, Bob Cunningham stood alone, leaning on the seat of his motor-bicycle, by the side of a road that skirted a forest of pine trees. A few weeks before he had left school for the summer holidays, and for the last fortnight he had found himself in the very vortex of the most colossal and terrible war the world has ever seen.

By reason of the fact that the country was somewhat wooded, no sign of life was to be seen; and yet both to the east and to the west the sound of heavy guns was audible.

Cunningham, who had just carried a dispatch to the general officer commanding a division towards the left flank, was endeavouring to find the headquarters of his own brigade, which, he knew, must be somewhere in the vicinity.

As he stood by the roadside, irresolute, uncertain which way to go, a burst of musketry broke out to the north. This swelled in intensity, and presently, from somewhere quite near at hand, two or three batteries of field artillery joined in the action. Bob, deciding that it was best to follow Napoleon's maxim, to march towards the firing, sprang on to his bicycle, and rode swiftly downhill into a narrow valley.

A little farther on he was confronted by a slope, so steep that he was obliged to get off and walk. By the time he reached the hill-top, the firing was not only louder but had extended several miles towards the east.

On the left of the road was a clump of trees which

stood forth boldly against the red light of the setting sun. The leaves from these trees, which even then were falling to the ground, carpeted the roadway so thickly that Bob's footsteps fell quite noiselessly. He was about to remount his bicycle and continue on his way when, on a sudden, he was brought to an abrupt standstill. He stood motionless and amazed, unable to believe the evidence of his eyes.

He knew well enough by the direction of the firing that he was well in the rear of some portion of the British force; and yet, immediately in front of him, standing in the shadow of the trees, was the figure of a Prussian officer. There was no mistaking the spiked helmet, the long, grey-blue cloak with the velvet collar, the red-and-gold sword belt, and the glittering sword. Cunningham, leaving his bicycle in the roadway, went forward stealthily on hands and knees, taking advantage of such cover as was afforded by a narrow drainage ditch.

When he got near to the German he was able to take stock of the man. He was a big, thickset fellow, of the rank of *hauptmann*, or captain. The several decorations he wore, including the Iron Cross itself, testified to the fact that he was one who had already rendered distinguished service to his Emperor.

Cunningham carried a revolver at his waist. At first he had half a mind to use it; but it is not such a simple matter as one might think to slay a human being in cold blood without a word of warning.

Bob drew his revolver, even cocked the trigger, and then slowly closed the safety-catch and returned the weapon to his holster. He was resolved, if possible, to take the Prussian alive.

He continued to crawl forward on hands and knees until he was immediately behind the officer. Then, with one spring, he hurled himself upon his victim.

Both fell to the ground. The German was a strong man, but he had been taken completely by surprise. Before he had time to realize what had happened, his sword had been drawn and thrown away, and his own revolver was levelled at his head.

With a thick, guttural oath, obedient to Bob's orders he threw up both his hands.

"All right," said he. "I surrender."

He spoke excellent English; and as he spoke, he did his best to force a smile.

Bob with quick hands turned out the officer's pockets. He found therein a little money, and a pocket-book containing written orders. These orders made it perfectly clear that the captured officer went by the name of Hauptmann von Hiegler, and that he had been placed in command of a certain armoured car, which was referred to as "disguised".

"I am your prisoner," said von Hiegler, bowing with the stiff formality of all his nation.

"You will be so good as to accompany me to the head-quarters of my brigade; where, I can

assure you, you will be treated with courtesy and respect."

"I am pleased to hear it," said the other. "In the German army the British are understood to maltreat their prisoners."

"Then," said Cunningham, "the German army is asked to believe what is certainly not the truth."

"Perhaps," said the other, with a shrug of the shoulders. "At any rate, such rumours serve their purpose."

Cunningham turned sharply. He had intended to treat his captive with marked consideration, but there was something in the man's manner, no less than in his words, that was exasperating.

"What purpose?" he demanded.

"It is essential," said von Hiegler, "that our soldiers hate the English. England is the real enemy of the German Empire; England alone stands in the way of German progress and culture."

Bob Cunningham laughed.

"For that reason," said he, "you declare war against Russia, and concentrate your forces on the frontiers of France?"

Von Hiegler shrugged again.

"It was necessary to wipe out France," said he, "before we could get at England. As I have said, England is the real enemy that we mean to destroy. Make no mistake, my young, confiding friend, this retreat is only for strategic purposes. In a few days Paris will fall, and after that—to London!"

When Captain von Hiegler talked, he gesticulated slightly with his hands, but he stood stock-still, as men frequently do when engrossed in conversation. Bob little suspected at the time that all the man desired was to delay his captor. The whole thing was a ruse, cleverly planned, and accomplished with Teutonic cunning. The German, by the open expression of his opinions, had succeeded in arousing the young Englishman's anger, and at the same time had managed to delay the moment when he should be conducted to the British bivouac.

When Bob had first caught sight of him, the Prussian was viewing the landscape through a pair of field-glasses, and apparently making certain notes in his pocket-book and filling in the details of a map on a cavalry sketching-case. Bob was now quite certain in his mind that the head-quarters of his brigade were established in the valley, towards the east; and thither he intended to take his prisoner, by way of a footpath through some vineyards that led down the hill. On this footpath there was just room for him to wheel his motor-bicycle, and, ordering the German to walk on before him, he was about to follow when his attention was attracted by the loud, purring sound of a motor-car which was rapidly approaching.

Von Hiegler stopped, and raised a hand to an ear. Cunningham also stood still and waited, which was one of the most fatal actions of his life. The face of von Hiegler—who all along must have

known what was about to happen—was quite expressionless.

A moment later an exceptionally large motor-car came in sight, moving rapidly from the north. Opposite the clump of trees where the Prussian had been captured it came to a standstill. Neither the driver nor any other occupant was visible.

The appearance of the car was singular. It was evidently a hospital motor, for it was wholly covered by a great white hood, on either side of which was the red cross of Geneva.

From the very first Bob Cunningham was suspicious. To begin with, the car was a great deal larger than those usually employed for work with bearer companies or field hospitals. Also, in the hood itself was a great number of eye-holes, which were large enough to be used as loopholes for rifles. Thirdly, when the car stopped, no one made his appearance on the roadway, though it was quite evident that there were several people inside; since, not only could their voices be heard, but the hood itself was occasionally seen to move.

When Cunningham looked at von Hiegler he realized that, by means of treachery, the tables had been turned. The Prussian was smiling with an air of confidence as he threw back his cloak.

"You have a loaded revolver," said he, "but I advise you not to use it. If you endeavour to shoot me you will be dropped dead upon the instant. In that car—which is armoured—are three of the finest marksmen in Pomerania."

Bob Cunningham looked about him wildly.

"You villain!" he exclaimed.

At that, regardless of the consequences, he lifted his revolver and fired. In the heat of the moment he fired too quickly; for, though his aim was straight, the bullet flew too high, and the spike of the German's helmet was cut away like a thistle.

Immediately two shots rang out from the covered car, and the bullets whistled past the young Englishman's head. One cut the lobe of an ear, and Cunningham immediately became conscious of warm blood running down his neck and spreading across his shoulder. At the same time he saw that, if he were to escape, there was no time to lose. Leaving von Hiegler to look after himself, Bob rushed his motor-bicycle on to the road, sprang into the saddle, and set off towards the south.

As he did so five men leapt from the car. Looking back, Bob saw that two of these were officers, and the other three—who were armed with rifles—private soldiers; no doubt the men who had been described by the Prussian as "the finest shots in Pomerania". This party was evidently employed upon what is known as an officers' patrol; that is to say, a reconnoitring party, to gain knowledge of the enemy's country and the dispositions of his troops. There was every chance that such a reconnaissance, carried out under the red cross, in an armoured car disguised as an ambulance, could be accomplished with the greatest degree of success. The car had been able to move in the very midst of

the allied lines, whence the officers could take stock of their surroundings through the eye-holes in the hood.

As Bob Cunningham raced upon his way the bullets flicked the dust upon the roadway on either side. The light, however, was failing fast. The sun had already sunk beyond the hills; and, in any case, it is not easy to hit a man who is travelling at the rate of thirty miles an hour. Bob crossed the valley he had passed before, and then turned to the left, taking the direction in which he was now quite sure that he would find his general.

It was not long before he fell in with some men belonging to one of the regiments in the brigade, and these directed him upon his way. By the time he gained the bivouac it was quite dark; but heavy firing still continued to the north. It was evident that the Germans, fighting a rear-guard action, were disputing every inch of the way.

The Brigadier, whose name was Sir Henry Cole, was a soldier who had already distinguished himself in many an expedition. He had served with distinction during the campaign in Egypt, and had commanded a small column at the time of the South African War. As soon as he was told that Private Cunningham—one of his most trusted dispatch-riders—was waiting to see him, he ordered the motor-cyclist to be shown into the farm-house which he had made his head-quarters for the night.

Sir Henry was seated before a table upon which

were a map, writing materials, and a multitude of papers.

"Ah, Cunningham!" said he, looking up, and twisting a pair of compasses in his hand. "I wanted to see you. Did you get through all right to General Huxly's division?"

"Yes, sir," said Cunningham. "I handed your message to the chief staff-officer, and received a receipt for it."

"Good!" said the General. Then his expression changed. "But, man alive," he cried, "you're wounded!"

"A scratch, sir," answered the dispatch-rider. "Nothing more."

And thereupon Bob told his whole story to the General. He described how he had captured Captain von Hiegler, and how the Prussian had been rescued by an officers' patrol in an armoured car which was covered over by the hood of an ambulance wagon.

The General, as he heard the story, jabbed the table with his pair of compasses.

"How blind we've been!" he cried. "I thought the Germans had a sense of honour. Even now I can hardly believe that officers and gentlemen can fight like this. However, they are preparing for themselves a sorry day of retribution. The whole civilized world is never likely to forget what they have done. But I have no time now to waste in words. Are you ready to go out again?"

"Yes, sir," answered the other promptly.

"You are quite sure?" said the General. "You are quite sure that your wound is not too painful? Though you happen to be one of my orderlies, I mustn't forget that I am an old friend of your father's, and have known your mother since she was a girl."

"My wound is nothing, sir," said Bob. "I am quite capable of carrying on with my work."

"Then," said the General, leaning forward and bringing the tips of his fingers together, "pay attention and listen to what I have to say. It is of the utmost importance."

Bob Cunningham, standing in the attitude of a soldier, waited in patience whilst Sir Henry quietly lighted a cigar.

CHAPTER II

Dr. D'Avignon

"In the first place," said the General, "it is necessary for you to understand precisely what has happened. Early this afternoon I issued orders to the regiments under my command to follow up the retreat of the enemy at all costs, to push on without delay. The Wessex Fusiliers were thrown out to the left; the other three battalions became heavily engaged with the German rear-guard. I sent a dispatch-rider to the officer commanding the Fusiliers, ordering him to push on no farther, but to await the advance of the other battalion on his right. As far as I can make out, that dispatch-rider never reached his destination; he was either killed or captured, or else he missed the road. At any rate, the Fusiliers are lost; which is a plain, unpleasant fact. In thickly-wooded country like this, one's field of view is restricted. The only aeroplane at my disposal has been put out of action; and, besides, it is already dark. I have no cavalry. Therefore, I want you to go forward and see if you can find the lost battalion. They are somewhere to the left; that is all I can tell you.

If you come up with them, tell the Colonel what has happened. Say that the advance of the rest of the brigade has been held in check, and the Fusiliers are to fall back and await the general advance."

At that the General arose to his feet, telling Cunningham to study the map which lay upon the table. He pointed out the direction in which he thought the battalion had gone. According to Sir Henry's calculations, the Fusiliers must be nearing a small stream that flowed from the south, forming a tributary of the Aisne, and which went by the name of the Aisnelle.

Bob studied the map for some time in silence; then, drawing his own map from his pocket, he marked the road which the General wished him to take.

"Are there any further orders, sir?" he asked.

"None," said the General; "except that you are to push on in all haste. There is not a moment to lose. The Wessex Fusiliers are already far in advance of the general alignment. There is a chance that they may be cut off and overpowered by superior numbers."

Whereupon Sir Henry seated himself once again at the table, and began to turn over a pile of papers which his Brigade-major—who had just entered the room—placed before him.

Bob Cunningham saluted and went out. It was now starlight, though the moon had not yet risen. Though he had had nothing to eat since early that

morning, and practically no sleep the night before, he was well content to set off immediately upon his errand. All day his motor-bicycle had been running well. He hoped to overtake the lost battalion and to return to the bivouac before midnight. This, however, was no more than an intention; and, as all the world knows, intentions are very apt to go astray. Never for one moment did the boy dream of the adventures that were about to befall him.

He started off on a white road, running between vineyards, which dipped presently into a valley. To his right the musketry firing had ceased; but from both sides guns continued to shell the positions of their invisible foes.

As Cunningham rode forward, travelling at a steady pace of about twenty-five miles an hour, the sound of the firing grew less and less distinct. Though he was still in the midst of armies, though the line of battle extended for miles both to the east and to the west, the country in which he found himself was practically deserted. In most of the farm-houses and cottages there were no lights to be seen. No sound disturbed the stillness of the night, except the throbbing of his own engine and the distant sound of guns.

And then, on a sudden, there came to his ears a soft, rhythmic, purring sound that was like the droning of a monster bee. A large motor-car was somewhere on the road; and presently two great, staring lamps appeared before him in the darkness like the eyes of some monstrous, savage beast.

Round a sharp angle in the road he came upon the car itself with a suddenness that was alarming. On the instant he turned on his light, by means of which he was able to recognize the motor-car at once. It was nothing less than the so-called ambulance car in which von Hiegler secreted his officers and men.

It was undoubtedly a stroke of luck that Cunningham was not then run down and captured. The armoured car was not thirty paces in front of him when Bob caught sight of a by-lane branching to the left. Putting on full speed, he flew into this for safety, and raced onward for life itself.

A little after he became conscious of the fact that the armoured car was following in pursuit. Even above the noise of his own engine he was able to hear the droning of the motor, racing onward at the rate of at least forty miles an hour. Whenever he looked back he could see two great, staring lights, seeming in the darkness a great deal bigger and stronger than they were.

As bad luck had it, the road was more or less straight, and the car was able to travel at a great velocity. And a race between an ordinary motor-bicycle and an eighty-horse-power Austrian Daimler is an unequal one, to say the least of it. Cunningham could not disguise the fact that he was being overtaken foot by foot. Escape seemed impossible.

Presently a shot rang out, and then a second, and a third. As the young Englishman leaned forward on the handles of his bicycle, bullets sang

past his ears, each time with that queer two-noted whistle that is not unlike the call of a bird. The boy was no stranger to the sound; but, if the truth be told, the more he heard of it the less he liked it.

Bob recognized his danger from the first. He knew well enough that if the road continued to be broad and straight he could not possibly outdistance the car. Soon, nothing would remain for him to do but to spring off his bicycle and make off across country on foot. One thing—and one thing only—prevented him from doing this at once. His orders had been to find the Wessex Fusiliers, and, as far as he knew, he was no nearer the object of his search than he had been at the moment when he had left Sir Henry Cole.

He therefore stuck to his guns, as the saying goes, and rode forward in desperation at a headlong, breakneck pace. The roads were dry, for during August little or no rain had fallen, and the dust rose behind him in a column that was snow-white in the light of the stars. From time to time von Hiegler and his companions fired from the armoured car. They knew they had but to hit either the rider himself or the motor-cycle, and Cunningham was a prisoner in their hands.

The white milestones on the way flashed past in quick succession. Cunningham rode forward in such haste, and the German car was now so close upon his heels, that he never once looked back. All his energy and will-power, all his strength and

courage, were concentrated on his sole endeavour to escape.

Yard by yard the great car drew down upon him with inevitable precision. Presently it was so close that he was able to hear the voice of von Hiegler, who was shouting like a madman at the full power of his lungs.

"Surrender, you fool!" he cried. "It is all up with you. You are running straight into the German lines."

Bob paid no heed to this summons, but turned a sharp corner so suddenly that his bicycle was leaning over at an angle of almost forty-five degrees. And then it was that he beheld, immediately in front of him, something that spelt either destruction or deliverance. Right across the road a three-ton motor-lorry had broken down. On either side of the road were steep banks, and, as Bob neared the lorry, he was in grave doubt whether or not he had room to pass.

He steered direct for the tail-end of the lorry, hoping in his heart that he would be able to pass between the lorry and the bank. At the same time he realized his danger. He was still travelling at a great pace; and if there were no room to pass, his bicycle would be smashed to pieces, and he himself seriously hurt and captured.

As he neared the lorry he held his breath. As far as he was able to make out, he was steering straight for a small gap about a yard across. Shots were fired from behind, and once again he heard

von Hiegler's voice calling upon him to surrender. A bullet struck the woodwork of the lorry, not two feet from his head; and the fraction of a second later he found himself in safety on the other side of the lorry, and once again in the centre of the road.

As he raced forward he heard the driver of the armoured car jam on his brakes. He listened intently, hoping to hear the German car crash into the lorry. These hopes, however, were doomed to disappointment. The driver of the car had evidently put on his brakes in time, and a collision had been avoided. However, for the time being at least, the car was out of the race. Bob Cunningham had a clear road before him.

He was resolved at all costs to do his duty, to find, if possible, the Wessex Fusiliers. For all that, his task was by no means easy, since he had no idea as to where he was. He had left the main road which he had been ordered to take, and was probably some miles to the north-east of the point he had wished to gain.

He continued on his way more slowly, on the look-out for a road branching to the right, by means of which he might return to the main road on which he had encountered the armoured car.

After travelling for at least two miles he came to an open place where four roads met. On a plot of grass in the centre was a sign-post. Dismounting, he endeavoured to read the names that were written upon it, hoping thereby to identify his

whereabouts upon the map. The light, however, was not sufficient to enable him to do this, and he was about to trust to luck, and take the road to the right, when he became conscious of the figure of a man standing near by, leaning against the trunk of an oak tree, where he was half-hidden in the shade.

Instinctively Bob's hand went to his revolver. In time of war one must be prepared to shoot at sight.

"Who goes there?" cried Bob, placing a forefinger around the trigger and taking a quick step forward.

Immediately the man swung into the starlight, silently, after the manner of a ghost. The boy was so surprised that he was on the point of firing, when he discovered that the new-comer walked on crutches.

"A friend," cried the man. "A good friend to France—and England too."

He appeared to speak English quite well, but with a French accent. As he drew nearer, Bob saw that he was well dressed—evidently a man of means, and no peasant of the Marne. He was wearing civilian clothes.

"You are French?" asked Bob.

"What else?" said the other, throwing out a hand as he stood leaning on his crutches. "My name is D'Avignon, which is a good name, as names go in France. By profession I am a doctor; and at the outbreak of the war I offered my ser-

vices to the Government. I was sent to Alsace to tend the wounded; but I myself was hit in both legs whilst carrying a wounded soldier out of fire."

"A gallant action," Bob cut in.

"Perhaps," said Dr. D'Avignon. "At any rate, I received the *Croix d'Officier* in the Legion of Honour."

"You are far from your house?"

"Not far," answered the Frenchman. "A kilometre, perhaps. I came out to see if I could fall in with some of the allied troops. The Bosches are in the neighbourhood. I have important information."

"Would you be so good as to tell me where I am?"

"You are in a valley," said the doctor, "that is called the Valley of the Aisnelle—or the Little Aisne. Where do you wish to go?"

In Bob's mind there was not so much as a shade of doubt that he could trust the doctor implicitly. Dr. D'Avignon was a tall, handsome man, with iron-grey hair, and the face of a cuirassier. Bob decided to tell him the truth.

"I have been sent," said he, "on a very important errand. Certain orders have not reached their destination, and one of our battalions has gone astray. They should have halted at nightfall; but, obedient to the last orders the Colonel received, he has pushed on in all haste, and is now too far in advance."

The doctor swung nearer on his crutches, and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I can put you right," said he. "The matter is *terribly serious; there is no time to lose. Indeed, what you say only bears out what I myself have* seen. About two hours after nightfall, an English regiment crossed the only bridge that spans the Aisnelle. My house is not far from the bridge, on the other side of the river. A great body of Germans passed this afternoon; but they were in too great haste to do any damage to my property. Soon after the English regiment had gone by, the sound of firing came from the north. I thought nothing of it at the time. I knew that the Germans were in retreat, and that our troops and the English were following in pursuit. In these days it is impossible to go to sleep—and, besides, my wounds are very painful; instead of going to bed, I went down to the river. There, to my astonishment, I found a party of German engineers at work laying mines to blow up the bridge. I realized at once the danger that the British soldiers were in. In all probability the Germans were luring them to their doom, drawing them farther and farther to the north, whilst they blew up the bridge in their rear. I crossed the bridge without arousing suspicion, and came on here, where I had the good fortune to fall in with you."

Bob Cunningham seized the handles of his bicycle, and was about to spring into the saddle.

"I must get to the regiment," he cried, "cost

what it may. Tell me, in which direction is the bridge!"

"If you go straight ahead," cried D'Avignon, "you will come to the main road. Turn to the left, and you will find the bridge immediately before you. You cannot miss it."

Bob waited to hear no more. As he rode forward, the doctor called after him:

"Good luck! May you get through in safety!"

When the motor-cyclist had disappeared round the corner, Dr. D'Avignon remained standing in the middle of the road. Then he, too, set forward in the same direction, swinging himself along upon his crutches with an agility that was little short of marvellous in a man who must have been fifty years of age.

A moment later he stopped dead; and then, on a sudden, dived into a ditch that skirted the roadway, threw down his crutches, and lay flat upon his face.

Hardly had he done so than two glaring lamps flashed into sight; and, a little after, a large motor-car flew past at top speed. Though the car had come and vanished like a streak of light, Dr. D'Avignon had been able to observe that it was covered over with a great white hood, upon which was the red cross of Geneva.

D'Avignon, picking up his crutches, rose to his feet, and stroked his grey moustache.

"That car," said he to himself, "is suspicious. It is not customary to carry wounded at the rate of sixty miles an hour."

Then he continued on his way.

In the meantime Bob Cunningham was tearing forward. He knew that at any moment the bridge before him might be blown up; that possibly he had not more than a few minutes to spare.

Travelling at a great pace, he turned into the main road, whence for the first time he was able to see the big lights of von Hiegler's car following in pursuit. It was evident that the Prussian officer and his companions had managed to move the motor-lorry, which, fortunately for them, was nearly empty. If, on gaining the river, Bob found the bridge already destroyed, it was practically certain that he would fall into the hands of von Hiegler, who would probably be inclined to show him but little mercy.

As the boy approached the bridge, von Hiegler's car was at least a quarter of a mile in rear. It was all that Bob could do to contain a shout of triumph when he saw that the bridge was still intact. At any rate, he would be able to cross. Whether or not he would be able to get back again was another matter.

Standing on the bridge were several men, who, no doubt, were the German engineers of whom D'Avignon had spoken. Bob realized that, if he went slowly, he might be stopped and questioned; and if that happened, he was lost. His only hope was to ride full pace ahead, trusting to luck that the Germans would clear out of his way.

As he rushed up the ramp, he blew his horn and

let out a loud shout of warning. The engineers upon the bridge, most of whom were looking over at the base of the piers, where their comrades were laying mines of dynamite, were taken wholly by surprise. One man, who was standing in the middle of the road, just managed to get out of the way in the nick of time. Bob on his motor-cycle passed like a flash of lightning, and, a moment after, was safe on the northern side.

CHAPTER III

The Château des Dragons

THOUGH as yet he had not lived long in the world, Bob was one of those young gentlemen who had every reason to look upon himself as lucky. His father, an old soldier himself, was a great friend of Sir Henry Cole's; and, at the outbreak of the war, the General had not hesitated to enlist Bob's services as a special dispatch-rider, with the rank of a private.

Bob had done useful work on the Belgian frontier and during the great retreat from Mons. Some days before the Prussian officer, von Hiegler, had fallen into his hands, Cunningham had been mentioned in dispatches, and Sir Henry had already sent forward the boy's name for a commission.

It is well known that Fortune favours the bold; and certainly nothing could be bolder than Bob's headlong dash across the bridge to the northern side of the river. At the moment, the German engineers were fully occupied with their work of mining the bridge. They had barely time to look about them, to recognize the motor-cyclist as an

Englishman, much less to snatch up their rifles and fire.

Bob took the long, gently sloping hill on the northern side of the valley with all the speed he could, leaving on his left a small château, standing some way back from the road, to which it was connected by a drive, fringed by poplars, sycamores, and beech trees. At the entrance of the drive two lamps were burning, the light from which illumined a pair of enormous dragons, carved in stone, on either side of the gate. Upon the gate itself was written in gilded lettering the words, "Château des Dragons".

Leaving the Château des Dragons far behind him, Bob reached the crest-line of the hill, whence he looked back and saw the two great lights of von Hiegler's motor-car, still following in pursuit. At that he went on in greater haste than ever, passing through an undulating country where vines grew in profusion.

A full moon had now arisen. The night was cloudless, and the sky a multitude of stars. From the black country of northern France and the rolling downs of Normandy, the conflict had swayed into the heart of the old province of Champagne. The departments of Marne and Aisne, drained by the two rivers from which they take their names, are given over almost entirely to the cultivation of the grape. In consequence, the population is to a large extent rural; and we find—as, indeed, we do throughout the whole of western France, with the

exception of the manufacturing district around St. Étienne—a green land of hills and sunlit valleys, well sheltered from inclement winds, and clothed in sweeping vineyards. In the bright moonlight, the scene was at once picturesque and suggestive of a comfortable prosperity.

Suddenly Bob became conscious of the sound of musketry immediately in front of him. It was then about twelve o'clock; and men fighting at such an hour do so only at the closest range. The conflict was still some distance away, for the sound of the firing was audible only at such moments when Bob shut off his engine. It was like the crackling of green wood upon a fire.

Presently he came across a man, dressed in khaki, seated by the roadside, who was endeavouring, by means of his teeth and his left hand, to bind a handkerchief around an injured wrist, which had been severely damaged by a bullet.

"Who are you?" asked Cunningham, springing from his bicycle.

By the sound of the boy's voice, and his way of speaking, the soldier believed that he had been addressed by an officer.

"Private Sharp, sir," said he; "B Company, 1st Battalion, Wessex Fusiliers."

Then he realized that the boy was a private like himself.

"For the last hour," he went on, "we've been 'aving a scrap with the 'sossidges'. They're fighting what you might call a rear-guard action,

but they don't rightly understand the art and craft of the business, so to speak. I tell you, mate, when we got at 'em with the bayonet, they fairly 'opped it. I was shot in the wrist, and fell behind. I can't find the bloomin' ambulance, so I'm going back to Paree. Mate," said he, in an altered voice, "avvy-vous allymet?"

Cunningham produced a box of matches, and even lit the broken pipe which Private Sharp then produced from the inside of his cap.

"Mate," said Sharp, as he puffed the tobacco into a glow, "kombiang de kilomeat à Paiee?"

"It's a longish way," said Bob. "I should say about sixty miles."

"Lor' love a duck!" exclaimed Private Sharp. "Quelle dommage! Say mallaroo!"

"Besides, I doubt very much," said the other, "whether you will be able to cross the river. When I passed just now, the Germans were blowing up the bridge. I advise you to wait here, where you will probably be picked up by your own regiment, who are receiving orders to retire."

Private Sharp, puffing philosophically at his pipe, nodded his head in a friendly, complacent manner.

"Mercy bien," said he. "Vous-ate tray jauntee. Un bong camarade, as the French idiom 'as it."

"I must get on," said Bob. "I've urgent orders for your colonel."

Sharp nodded again.



"'MAIL,' SAID SHARP, 'KOMBIANG DE KILOMEAT À PAREE?'"

"Parfaitemong," said he. "Bong swore. Thanks for the allymet."

Whilst Private Sharp, of the Wessex Fusiliers, was thus airing his fluency in the Gallic tongue, Bob Cunningham was conscious of the fact that von Hiegler's car was rapidly approaching. At that moment the great twin lights came in sight upon a hill-top. Cunningham leapt upon the saddle of his bicycle, and, pointing excitedly to the rear, warned Sharp that the motor-car—though disguised as an ambulance—contained a party of Germans. A moment later he was flying onward, whilst Private Sharp, refusing to admit that discretion is the better part of valour, took up a position in the middle of the road, where he stood in an attitude of direct defiance, holding his rifle ready loaded at the charge.

It was evident that von Hiegler was determined to overtake the dispatch-rider at every cost. Regardless of his own danger, the Prussian was running straight into the British regiment.

A few minutes later, Cunningham came upon a party of men extended on either side of the roadway. The subaltern in charge told him that he would find the Colonel about two hundred yards ahead, at the same time volunteering the information that the Fusiliers were driving the Germans before them "like a flock of geese".

The Lieutenant-colonel in command was astounded when the dispatch-rider told him the truth. He said he had received instructions that afternoon

to follow up the German retreat, to press forward in haste. Since no further orders had reached him, he was under the impression that the other regiments of the brigade were operating on his right. When he was informed that his was the only battalion that had as yet crossed the Aisnelle, he made no attempt to conceal his consternation.

"But we're in danger of being cut off!" he cried. "It's more than probable that these fellows in front of us have been luring us on, whilst the bridge is blown up in rear. I can't make out how it was my orders never reached me."

"I think, sir," said Cunningham, "I can offer an explanation. All this afternoon and this evening a large German motor-car, covered over with an ambulance hood, upon which is the red cross, has been patrolling the roads in rear of the allied lines. It's more than probable, sir, that the dispatch-rider whom the General sent to you has fallen into the hands of these treacherous rascals."

"I must fall back at once," said the Colonel. "Our position is precarious. There's not a moment to lose."

He paused a moment before giving the necessary order for his men to retreat. Standing in the roadway, in the full light of the moon, he tugged at the ends of his moustache, with the air of a man perplexed. Then he turned sharply to Bob.

"Look here," said he, "I wish you'd go back to the bridge, as quickly as you can, and find out whether it's still intact. If we can only manage

to get across the river, we should be comparatively safe."

Bob saluted, and turned his bicycle round. Knowing that von Hiegler was still upon the road, he by no means liked the nature of the task allotted to him. However, it is a soldier's duty to obey without question or hesitation. He set off at top speed, wondering in a vague kind of way how he was going to pass the German car.

Presently he came upon Private Sharp, still stationed in the centre of the road.

"Whato!" cried Sharp. "Mong vear camararde! I've given the blighters something they'll remember. I'm not a marksman for nothing."

"How do you mean?" asked Bob, pulling up at the man's side.

"I mean what I say," said Sharp. "The car come along at about sixty miles an hour, and I put a bullet through it, slick. They must've thought they'd run into an army corps, for they stopped dead, and then turned round on the road. They'd not much room to spare, and it took them a tidy time to get the car facing the other way; and whilst they was turning, I emptied my magazine into the thick of them. I won't go so far as to say that my shooting would have won the gold guns—my wrist hurts something chronic—but that one bullet got 'ome, I'll take my affydavit, for someone let out a grunt that stopped quite sudden-like. An' I've heard that sound afore."

There was no time just then to congratulate

Private Sharp upon his gallantry. Bob was anxious to get back to the bridge as quickly as he could.

"Where's the car now?" he asked, in a breathless voice.

"Gone back," said the soldier. "I saw its tail-light vanish over the 'ill."

Bob waited no longer, but set off once more upon his journey.

Presently he came upon the body of a man lying by the roadside, in the moonlight. Dismounting, he saw at once that Sharp's rifle had done its work. One of "the finest shots in Pomerania" had breathed his last.

The boy was still about three miles to the north of the river. That was a distance that he could cover on his motor-bicycle in a remarkably short space of time; but it would take the Fusiliers, who would have to disengage themselves from the enemy, considerably more than an hour.

As he raced forward Bob tried to think what it would be best to do should he find the Germans in the act of destroying the bridge. He could hardly hope to prevent the disaster taking place. He was single-handed, and armed only with a revolver; and the Germans—whatever else they were—were seldom cowards.

When the boy reached the crest-line of the hill, he was able to see the red tail-light of von Hiegler's car ahead. As he looked, the car turned to the right, and the red light disappeared behind some

trees. Bob thought for a moment, and then remembered the "Château des Dragons". It was evident that the German car was moving down the drive. This was so much the better for Bob. He hoped to be able to pass the gates of the château unseen, and come within view of the bridge. Accordingly, a little farther on he dismounted, and went forward on foot. As we know, in the neighbourhood of the château were several trees; and keeping in the shadow of these the boy advanced as silently as possible.

Suddenly, at the very moment when he thought that he was safe, two men sprang upon him from out of the darkness. He had just time to snatch his revolver from its holster, and then both arms were pinned to his sides.

He struggled desperately, but all his strength was of no avail. Each of those who held him was a powerful man—they were, in fact, von Hiegler's Pomeranians; and in less than a minute the boy was overpowered.

His coat was taken off by order of von Hiegler, who stood near at hand, somewhere in the darkness under the trees. The Prussian also demanded the boy's forage cap, haversack, and revolver, and then told his men to bind the prisoner's hands behind his back.

The Prussian then stepped into the moonlight, his sword clicking and jumping upon the stones that strewed the road before the gates of the château.

"We may cry quits," said he. "I have got you at last; though it took me rather longer than I thought. It was altogether necessary that you should fall into my hands."

"You flatter me," said Bob. "But have no delusions. I am nothing more than a private."

"That may be so," answered the other. "Still, a private soldier may be a dangerous enemy when he possesses valuable information. You seem to forget that you were the first to discover my little device."

"Device!" cried Cunningham, his indignation rising in a flood. "You call it a device, to screen yourself behind the red cross whilst you make your observations! But if you think that by capturing me you keep your secret, you're mistaken. I have already reported what I know."

It was evident that this news was by no means palatable to the German; for, turning upon his heel with an oath, he ordered his two men to lead their prisoner to the château.

"The English," he growled, "cannot be here for an hour. We have at least twenty minutes in which to dine. We will procure dinner at the expense of the good people yonder, who have the temerity to keep lights burning long after midnight."

He made this last remark in German, for the benefit of his comrades; after which he spoke no more until he had reached the front door of the château, where his two brother officers were waiting

with the car. He endeavoured to kick the door in with his boot. Failing to open it by this means, he rang the bell so violently that he broke it, at the same time beating upon the panels with the hilt of his sword.

In about five minutes, during which space of time von Hiegler stamped and swore, and exhibited a degree of impatience that would have shamed a child, a bolt was drawn, a lock turned, and the door was thrown open.

They found themselves before a brightly lighted hall, in which were several pictures, a suit of armour, and a small statuette of the well-known Cupid from the Luxembourg. On the threshold stood a girl of about nineteen years of age, clad in a black dress, with a face that was strikingly beautiful, in spite of her extreme pallor. There was no doubt that she was afraid, but her close-pressed lips and boldly defiant eyes gave her an air of courage. Immediately behind the girl stood an old lady, also dressed in black. It was the girl herself who spoke.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Von Heigler saluted, bowing.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "we wish for something to eat and drink. You will be so good as to give us whatever we require."

He spoke French extremely badly. The girl stood aside.

"You have permission to enter," she said, "but I can hardly say that you are welcome."

Von Hiegler ignored this last remark, which, perhaps, he failed to understand. In the hall he saluted the old lady, and bowed again.

"Bring in that English dog!" he cried. "I'll not let him out of my sight for a single moment."

At which he took off his helmet and jammed it on the head of the little marble Cupid.

CHAPTER IV

The Bridge

OUTSIDE Cunningham had noticed the armoured car, covered over with the white hood upon which was the red cross of Geneva. After having switched off the head-lights, the two officers—who proved to be lieutenants in the army of the Crown Prince of Saxony—entered the hall, saluting and bowing to the two French ladies, the younger of whom responded with the curtest of nods. As for the two Pomeranians, von Hiegler ordered them to find their own way to the kitchen, where, he told them, they were at liberty to help themselves to whatsoever they wanted.

"And now, mademoiselle," said he, in his atrocious French, "you will be so good as to lay the table for three."

Without hesitation the girl opened a door to the left, and, entering the dining-room, lit a tall standard lamp. Von Hiegler and his two lieutenants followed, one of the Saxons thrusting Bob before him. The old lady, who was so infirm that she could not walk without the aid of a stick, was the last to enter. She went straight to the fireplace,

where she seated herself in an arm-chair, whence for minutes at a time she continued to regard the Germans with the bold, unflinching gaze of one who is at a loss to explain a novel situation.

The girl opened a drawer in a sideboard, from which she took a table-cloth. This she spread neatly upon the table.

"Mademoiselle," said the Prussian, "you must be quick. We have no time to spare."

"You can have something cold at once," she answered.

"Whatever you have," said von Hiegler. "My brother officers and myself are famished. Gerhardt," he added, turning to the younger of the two, who stood stiff as a ramrod, with his heels together, looking with his shaven scalp and expressionless face for all the world like a magnified wooden soldier, "find your way to the cellar, and bring champagne and liqueurs. What we do not drink, we can take away with us in the car."

Both Lieutenant Gerhardt and his companion—who answered to the name of Richter—a big, bloated fellow with a blonde moustache, departed on their errand. As for von Hiegler, he sprawled full-length upon a sofa, whilst the girl laid the table; and Bob Cunningham looked on, an irate but impotent spectator, his hands still bound behind his back.

Even had the young Englishman not known the Prussian officer already for one who scorned the rules of war and common justice, von Hiegler's

present behaviour had been enough to make Bob chafe at his captivity. He would have given worlds just then to have had his hands free, that he might show the Prussian the nature and meaning of a pair of British fists. And this desire was, if anything, intensified by the beauty and self-possession of the girl, who went about her business with an air of resignation.

Presently the two lieutenants returned, each with an armful of bottles, which they set upon the table in rows, like so many ninepins. They made in all three journeys to the cellar; after which there were at least four dozen bottles on the table—bottles of champagne, claret, and various liqueurs. By then the girl had spread upon the table a repast of cold meat, vegetables, and fruit.

Von Hiegler got to his feet, rubbing his hands.

"And now," said he, "we dine."

He seated himself at the head of the table, with his lieutenants on either side. It appeared that, in the eyes of the Prussian, the most essential part of "dining" was to drink; for, seizing a magnum of champagne, and not troubling to draw the cork, he knocked off the head of the bottle with the hilt of his sword, so that much of the wine was spilt. It was then that the girl moved to the door, as if about to leave them. But von Hiegler called her back.

"You stay here," said he, "and wait on us. Do you think the Emperor's officers can be left to serve themselves? I assure you, mademoiselle,

both my friends and myself are of good family. Besides, you are good to look at; and it is well known that a pretty face gives a relish to even the worst of dinners."

"I, also, am well born," she answered.

Von Hiegler, whose mouth was full, looked up as if surprised.

"No doubt," said he; "but you have the misfortune to be French. You will be so good as to do what you are told."

All this time the prisoner was lashing himself into a fit of impotent fury. It was exasperating enough to have to watch the German officers eating, whereas he himself had not touched a morsel of food for twenty-four hours, but it was almost maddening to stand a witness to the insulting way in which von Hiegler treated the girl. There was a certain arrogance about him, an air of assumed superiority, combined with open rudeness, that was quite unbearable.

Yet the boy could do nothing. Not only were his hands securely bound, but these had been lashed to the back of the chair upon which he was seated. Von Hiegler, ignoring both the prisoner and the old lady by the fireplace, drank glass after glass of champagne—to the Emperor, the Fatherland, to the downfall of France and England, and to the health of the girl herself.

Suddenly, from somewhere within the house, there came a crash that caused the old lady to let out a scream and the three German officers to spring

sharply to their feet. As for Bob, it so chanced that at that moment his eyes were fixed upon the pale face of the girl, and, although the noise was such that a shell might have burst through the roof, he was afterwards able to state that she had not even started.

Von Hiegler stood motionless, listening. And then his expression slowly changed from expectation to insensate fury, when there came to their ears the loud voice of someone singing—a very raucous and discordant interpretation of "*Deutschland über alles*".

Purple with rage, the Prussian snatched up a riding-whip and, followed by his two lieutenants, found his way to the kitchen.

There he discovered his Pomeranians. One, with legs widespread, was seated on the floor in the midst of the wreckage of several wine bottles and scores of plates and glasses, smashed to atoms by the falling of a kitchen dresser. The other, standing perilously near the edge of the kitchen table, waved a drawn sword in his hand, whilst he bellowed forth the flamboyant words of what almost amounts to the German National Anthem.

On beholding their officer it was as if these men became transfigured. To all appearances both had been made sober as by a miracle. They appeared terrified and dumb. One struggled to his feet; the other climbed down slowly from the table. Then, side by side, in the centre of the room, they stood rigidly to attention, with their heels pressed

together and their eyes fixed vacantly before them.

Von Hiegler, who had drunk too much himself, let fly a string of oaths; and then, lifting his riding-whip, slashed both his "gallant Pomeranians" across the face. Not once, but three times, did the whip fall; and even then, though there were great weals across their faces, the two men stood stiff, motionless, and silent.

In the meantime, Bob found himself alone with the old lady and the girl, who then gave proof of her patriotism and devotion.

Hardly had von Hiegler and his companions left the room than, snatching a knife from the table, she hastened to cut the bonds that bound the prisoner. A moment later, Bob Cunningham was free.

He moved swiftly towards the door; but the girl went to a casement window that gave upon the garden, and threw it open.

"This way," said she; "it is quicker and more safe."

The boy paused a moment.

"Come, too," said he; "you cannot remain here. When that man finds that I have escaped, he will not be answerable for his actions. As it is, he is half-drunk already. Your life will be in danger."

The girl threw up her head.

"I care nothing for that," said she. "In this fearful war, both my brothers have been killed, and my father severely wounded. Go. Be quick! There is not a second to lose."

"You will tell me your name?" said Bob. He knew not which to admire the most: the girl's splendid courage or her beauty.

"Désirée D'Avignon. But please go. Be quick!"

By then they were in the garden, where the moonlight played upon the swaying branches of the trees.

"D'Avignon!" repeated the other. "Then your father is the man I met this evening."

"Perhaps so," said the girl. "He went out soon after dark. He may return at any moment."

It was then that the figure of von Hiegler appeared in the illumined window. Immediately the girl hastened back to the room, whilst Bob, still in his shirt-sleeves, set off running down the drive.

Four shots rang out in quick succession, and the bullets whistled past his head. When he looked back he saw the Prussian dragging the girl into the centre of the room. The coward's hand, in which was the whip with which he had struck his men, was even then raised above his head. A moment later there came a sound that seemed to clutch at the very strings of an English heart. It was the sound of a woman's shriek.

Bob came to a halt, breathless, undecided. He felt like one who beholds in a nightmare some calamity approaching—a calamity from which it is impossible to escape. He was about to go back, to hurl himself at the throat of the Prussian, when he remembered the bridge which it was his duty to

save, at any cost. A moment later he set off running beneath the shadow of the trees.

He came presently to the gate where stood the two stone dragons, and here turned to his right. To the north, firing was still audible; the Fusiliers were fighting their way back to the Aisnelle. Advancing cautiously on tiptoe, he drew nearer to the bridge, where he could see that the engineers were still at work.

There was little doubt, however, that they had all but finished their task. In the moonlight, Bob could see the mines laid at the base of each of the brickwork piers; and these were, in all probability, connected one with another by a fuse, by means of which all could be exploded simultaneously.

On the northern bank of the river was a marsh where bulrushes grew in profusion. Cunningham, wading in a black, glutinous mud, advanced cautiously under cover of these, until he found himself knee-deep in the water of the river.

Immediately above him was one of the iron girders of the bridge itself. Seizing hold of this, the boy lifted himself clear of the water, and climbed along the girder towards the central pier.

As he moved forward, he heard footsteps immediately above him. The German engineers were hastening from the bridge to the safety of the northern bank. There was small chance that his presence would be discovered; he was directly beneath the roadway, and well screened from the light of the moon.

For all that, he himself was able to take in his surroundings. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness, and the moonshine fell full upon the surface of the water.

The bridge was supported by three piers, from each of which several bricks had been detached. In the cavities thus formed, boxes of dynamite had been placed, each of which was connected by an instantaneous fuse to a long safety fuse that trailed across the girders to the middle pier.

The idea of this is obvious. The method is that usually employed by military engineers for hasty demolitions. The safety fuse, which burns at the rate of three feet a minute, gives time for the engineers to get well away before the instantaneous fuses are lighted. These, which are always of equal lengths when more than one charge is to be exploded, enable all charges to be fired simultaneously, so that the greatest possible damage may ensue.

The continuous firing on the northern side of the river, where the Wessex Fusiliers were fighting a rear-guard action, was drawing closer and closer. The German engineers had now retreated some distance from the bridge, when, as one man, they cried out to someone who was evidently approaching the bridge on the southern bank. It was this that caused Bob Cunningham to realize the truth, the imminent peril in which he stood. The safety fuse was alight.

Looking about him, his heart thumping against

his ribs, the boy suddenly caught sight of a spluttering jet of fire, moving slowly towards the central pier, about ten yards from where he sat straddle-legged across a girder.

Unable to suppress an exclamation of alarm, he swung himself forward, in a frantic endeavour to overtake the burning portion of the fuse. And as he did so he caught sight of a figure in the moonlight—the figure of a man on crutches—who, ignorant of his danger, was about to attempt to cross the bridge.

CHAPTER V

An Introduction

THE burning end of the fuse was like a candle-flame that crept forward in the darkness with the restless activity of the forked tongue of a venomous snake. With deadly certainty, during those terrible moments, it drew nearer and nearer to the instantaneous fuses connected with the several charges, the immediate explosion of which would shatter the bridge from one bank of the river to the other.

Putting forth the whole of his strength, Bob swung himself like a monkey along the girder. As he moved, the calamitous result of failure occurred to him for the first time. If he should be too late, not only would the bridge be destroyed and the Fusiliers cut off from their only line of retreat, not only would he himself be blown to atoms, but the unsuspecting cripple, the tapping sound of whose crutches was already audible on the roadway of the bridge, would share the same horrid fate. Nor was the boy able to forget that Dr. D'Avignon was the father of the girl who had aided him to escape. In moments such as this, it is as if the human mind is a supersensitive film

upon which are flashed upon the instant a hundred various impressions.

A heavy perspiration broke out upon his brow—more the outcome of the danger in which he found himself than of mere physical exertion. And yet he felt cold in all his limbs. The safety fuse was immediately above him. The flame was not six inches from the junction of the instantaneous fuses, when he thrust forth a hand and crushed out the light, as a man might pluck a nettle.

Then once again he swung himself upon the girder, where, with feverish anxiety, he beat upon the fuse with the opened palm of his hand, to make quite sure that not so much as a living spark remained. That done, he climbed on to the roadway of the bridge, where he remained standing half-stupefied, like one newly awakened from a dream, wiping the sleeve of his coat across his forehead.

Dr. D'Avignon, coming to an abrupt halt, and resting on his crutches, stared at the boy in the moonlight.

"It is you!" he exclaimed. "Have you dropped from the clouds?"

"Why, no, sir," answered Bob, who was still not sufficiently recovered from his excitement to speak without a tremor in his voice. "When I came back to the bridge, I found that the mines had been laid, and that the fuse was lighted. I climbed along one of the girders, and put out the flame in the nick of time. It was a narrow squeak. A

second later and the whole bridge would have gone."

D'Avignon whistled, looking about him.

"It was a brave deed," said he. "They gave me the Cross of the Legion of Honour for less than that. Who lit the fuse?"

"A party of German engineers," said Bob. "The men who shouted to you as you came upon the bridge. They made off in all haste along the river bank. They cannot be far away from us now. No doubt they are listening for the sound of the explosion."

D'Avignon waved one of his crutches, making a series of little circles in the air.

"You had best be off," he exclaimed. "Your life is in danger. They will come back when they find out that the bridge has been saved."

He pointed to the southern side of the river, as if he expected that the young Englishman would set off running in that direction. But Bob turned to the north.

"We must go this way," said he. "They are in possession of your house."

Dr. D'Avignon straightened, as if a blow had been struck him.

"My house!" he exclaimed. "They! Who?"

"A man called von Hiegler, a Prussian, who all day long has been passing to and fro behind the allied lines in an armoured motor-car disguised as an ambulance. He has with him two other officers and two soldiers—Pomeranians."

The doctor had not yet recovered from his surprise.

"My house!" he repeated. "But my mother and daughter are there."

"It was your daughter, sir," said Bob, "who helped me to escape. For that very reason she was struck by von Hiegler. It was the last thing I saw."

D'Avignon paused a moment, looking about him at the bright moonshine on the surface of the water, and the dark shadows of the trees on either bank. He seemed to be turning the matter over in his mind. He did not appear to have yet grasped the truth. The sound of musketry was coming nearer and nearer.

"We must go back," said the doctor, and then added, in a voice that was quite calm, "Are you armed?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"My revolver has been taken from me," said he, "also my coat and all my equipment. I am armed with nothing better than my fists, which fortunately I know how to use."

"I am worse off than you," said the Frenchman. "Not only am I unarmed, but I am a cripple, as you see. However, I also return to the château."

Thereupon he set off upon his crutches, swinging himself forward so quickly that it was all Bob could do to keep up with him. All this time, they had neither seen nor heard anything of the German engineers who had laid the mines beneath the

bridge. They had, no doubt, made quite sure that the explosion would take place; and, recognizing that the English were falling back in haste upon the river, they had made good their escape whilst there was time.

Bob and the Frenchman walked up the main road towards the entrance of the drive where stood the two stone dragons that gave their name to the house.

"Where is your bicycle?" asked D'Avignon.

"Not far away," said the other. "When the Germans set upon me, I left it in a place where there are tall weeds growing in a ditch. I endeavoured to escape, but they were too quick for me."

"You had better fetch it," said D'Avignon. "I wait here for you. You may need it at any moment."

Bob saw the wisdom of this at once. Leaving the doctor standing under the trees, at a little distance from the gate, he hastened to the place where he had left his motor-bicycle.

He had no difficulty in finding it, and walked it back to the drive.

D'Avignon laid a hand upon the boy's shoulder.

"If the worst comes to the worst," said he, "and you have to run for your life, let me tell you there is another drive on the opposite side of the house—a drive which leads into a lane that runs north-westward, parallel to the river."

Hardly had the last words left the doctor's lips than, somewhere in the shadows, a twig snapped

loudly underfoot, and they heard someone stumble, and mutter softly to himself.

D'Avignon immediately sought cover behind the trunk of a tree. As for Bob, without firearms, or even a bayonet, he felt quite helpless. For some seconds he did not move, but stood rigid in a crouching attitude, straining both ears and eyes in the direction whence had come the sounds.

"Qui va là?" let out Dr. D'Avignon, in a quick, jerky voice. He was certain he had seen the figure of a man creeping stealthily under the trees.

They did not have long to wait for an answer. The voice that came to their ears was one that Bob was distinctly conscious of having heard before.

"Bong ammy de la Fronce," came from the direction of the fleeting shadow. "Bong ammy de Longletare. Vive Moosure Pointcarry! A bas les Allemongs!"

"Sharp!" cried Bob, coming forward into the moonlight.

"'Ullo! What cheer!" exclaimed Private Sharp, who recognized the dispatch-rider at once. "You gave me a proper scare, you did, when you turned in at the gate. Who's your four-legged pal?"

"Allow me to introduce you," said Bob. "Monsieur le docteur D'Avignon—Private Sharp."

"Bong swore, moosure," said Sharp, who promptly held out a hand. "No offence where none's intended. Je spare que vous ate on bong sonty."

Bob was unable to see the Frenchman's face; but

there was no doubt, by the tone of his voice, that he was perplexed—to say the least of it.

"I am afraid I did not quite catch what you said," said he in excellent English, with the characteristic politeness of his nation. "Perhaps if you spoke English I should understand more easily."

Private Sharp drew nearer to the doctor, and, the better to elucidate his meaning, punctuated each word by means of a thumb on the opened palm of the other hand.

"Je spare—I 'ope," said he. "Que vous ate—that you 'ave. On bong sonty—the good 'ealth. Vous avvy compree?"

"Vraiment," said Dr. D'Avignon. "But I think we waste time. I am naturally anxious to find out whether my mother and my child are safe."

Cunningham turned to Sharp.

"You have your rifle?" he asked.

"Parfaitemong," said Sharp, and then, lapsing into his mother-tongue, added: "But I ain't got no bloomin' ammunition."

"Do you hear that?" said Bob to the doctor. "We've not a round of ammunition between the three of us."

"It makes no difference," said the other. "My suggestion is this: we creep up to the house as silently as possible, and find out whether the Germans are still there. If so, you must take your motor-bicycle and go back to the English regiment, which, by the sound of the firing, is not far away. They may be able to send a party of men to sur-

round the house; in which case, we should take your Prussian prisoner."

At that Sharp slapped the doctor so violently and suddenly upon the back that he nearly knocked him over.

"Bong eeday, moosure!" he exclaimed. Then his voice changed. "It ain't 'alf a bit of luck for me," he added, in a confidential tone, "that I met you two. 'Ow was I to know the sossidges was in the 'ouse? I seed a light; and, 'aving 'ad nothin' to eat for eighteen hours, I was on my way to ask for a little bit o' quelquechose à monjay."

By then Bob Cunningham had wheeled his bicycle into the shade, where he leant it against the trunk of a tree. A moment later the two Englishmen, walking stealthily on tiptoe, and Dr. D'Avignon swinging himself forward upon his crutches, advanced in single file towards the house.

CHAPTER VI

The Baited Bear

As they drew nearer, the light in the casement window, through which Bob had escaped, grew larger and more bright.

The window opened upon a lawn where there were several rhododendron bushes. Behind one of these they were able to conceal themselves, whilst at the same time they could see clearly into the dining-room.

D'Avignon caught his breath when he beheld the figure of his daughter. He was the only one of the three who understood German sufficiently well to follow word by word the conversation that ensued.

Désirée stood with her back to the wall, immediately facing the window. Her face was deathly pale. For all that, she was as brave as ever, and moved her eyes repeatedly from Lieutenant Gerhardt to the Prussian, both of whom were shouting at the top of their voices, as men will who have lost their tempers. Richter, apparently quite unconcerned with the quarrel that was taking place between his brother officers, was at the table, drinking

as though he were seated in his favourite café in Berlin. As for the old lady, she remained in the arm-chair by the fireplace; but her face was now buried in her hands, and from time to time her narrow shoulders rocked.

Lieutenant Gerhardt, the young officer with the straight back and the shaven head, was wholly past the bounds of self-restraint. His face was flushed; his voice trembled with passion.

"What right had you," he cried, "to strike a woman? If the Englishman escaped, it was your fault for having left him."

"Look here," cried von Hiegler, "you seem to forget that I am your superior."

"This is no parade, sir," said the other sharply. "If I should neglect my duty, you are at liberty to report me. This affair is between man and man. I repeat, in no circumstance whatever had you the right to strike a defenceless woman."

"Say that again," cried the Captain, his anger rising in a flood, "and—*Himmel*—I shoot you dead."

Lieutenant Gerhardt bowed.

"I ask nothing better than a duel," said he, quite calmly.

Von Hiegler stared at the Lieutenant in amazement. It was fully half a minute before he recovered from his surprise; then he burst suddenly into laughter.

"Don Quixote!" he cried in loud derision. "You make a mountain of a mole-hill. I confess

I struck the girl in a fit of temper, because she helped a prisoner to escape. Perhaps already I regret a hasty action; but I will certainly not tolerate such words as you have used to me from a junior officer and a Saxon."

"I think," said the other, "Saxony can be left to look after herself. If you regret what you have done, you are free to apologize to the lady."

Here Désirée, whose woman's wit had enabled her to understand the greater part of what had been said, intervened, speaking in French.

"Pray do not quarrel on my account," she said. "I will not even go so far as to say that I did not deserve what I got. A woman can hardly expect to take an active part in such an affair as this, and then fall back upon the privileges of her sex."

"Do you hear that?" cried von Hiegler, as if in triumph. "She is well able to look after herself; so you can keep your sighs, my friend, until you get back to your beloved Dresden."

Gerhardt said nothing, but, turning his back upon his captain, walked to the other end of the room, where he flung himself into a chair.

"Come," cried von Hiegler, snatching up a half-empty bottle of champagne; "come, drink and be merry; to-morrow we may die."

"I'll drink no more," said Gerhardt, thrusting out his boots and folding his arms with an air of solid resolution.

It was evident that Lieutenant Gerhardt was a young man of spirit. Moreover, for all his bluster,

von Hiegler feared him, knowing, no doubt, that he himself had been at fault.

Indeed, the Prussian was by no means pleased with himself and the world in general; and when a man is angry with himself, and knows in his heart that he is in the wrong, he is not likely to be over-polite to those who take it upon themselves to rebuke him. Captain von Hiegler had been presented by Nature with an abundance of conceit. He not only imagined himself an exceedingly gallant soldier, but he was under the impression that he was quite irresistible as far as the opposite sex was concerned.

If the truth be told, he had wished to make an impression upon Désirée, who, he saw at once, was exceedingly pretty. He had, however, lost his temper, and committed an act of folly—not to say of cowardice; whereas the young subaltern had completely eclipsed his captain in the matter of gallantry and chivalry. Von Hiegler decided to find what compensation he could in the sparkling wine of France, of which he drained glass after glass as though it had been the lightest Munich beer.

Whilst the Prussian soothed his conscience with champagne, Gerhardt remained seated in an attitude of the deepest dejection. To the most casual observer of human nature, it must have been quite clear that the beauty of the French girl had made a great impression upon the young and susceptible Lieutenant. Not unnaturally, after what had taken

place, Désirée felt grateful for his behaviour; and it was this feeling that prompted her to cross the room and lay a hand upon Gerhardt's shoulder.

"Monsieur," she said, quite softly, "do not worry yourself because of me. I have no regrets. Captain von Hiegler is forgiven—if, indeed, he has done anything that makes forgiveness necessary. None the less, a thousand thanks for having spoken so manfully on my behalf."

At that, Lieutenant Gerhardt did a strange thing. He sprang sharply to his feet and drove his fist into the palm of a hand.

"This war is terrible!" he cried. "It is the women who must suffer."

She smiled sadly.

"My troubles," she said, "are the troubles of all France."

"Mademoiselle," said the other, "I would like to shield you from such distress. You are too beautiful to live in times like these. Mademoiselle, I make you an offer. My mother lives in Dresden, but she is now in Switzerland for her health. If you would care to go to her, I promise you she will look after you until the war is over."

He finished his speech by making a stiff, formal bow. Désirée could not but like him.

"You are very kind," she said; "but my duty is to stay in France."

It is a strange thing that this brief conversation infuriated von Hiegler more than anything that had gone before. In all probability his action was

prompted by jealousy, and nothing else; it must also be remembered that he had drunk far more champagne than was good for him, and he was, at the best, a man of violent nature. At any rate, in a fit of uncontrollable wrath he seized an empty bottle and hurled it against the wall, so that it broke into a hundred fragments.

"Enough of this sentimental cant!" he cried. "When the Emperor wages war, he does not expect his officers to pose as carpet knights. Moreover, you seem to forget that we are in danger here. The firing is drawing rapidly nearer. The English cannot be far away."

Gerhardt put on his helmet.

"I am ready to go," said he, "at once."

"Then go down to the kitchen, and fetch those pigs of Pomeranians. Tell them to get the car ready. I leave here in two minutes at the most."

Lieutenant Gerhardt went to the door. Before he left, he saluted both Désirée and the old woman, who had now sufficiently recovered herself to lift an ear-trumpet to an ear. As soon as the door had closed upon the back of the young Lieutenant, she spoke to her granddaughter in a thin, piping voice.

"Are they going to set fire to the house?" she asked.

Désirée went to her at once.

"No, dear," she said; "there is nothing to fear."

"I remember the other war," said the old woman, "forty-four years ago. Your grandfather com-

manded a regiment of chasseurs that surrendered with Bazaine. In those days they burnt many houses. It was terrible in Paris—more than forty years ago."

Her voice died away. It was just as if it had gone back into the Past, to lose itself in the distance of many years.

Von Hiegler rose to his feet, and stretched his legs before the fireplace. He was a tall, heavily built man, and like all such, shook the room when he walked. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he addressed the girl in the tone that he adopted to his "gallant Pomeranians".

"What right had you," he demanded, "to show favours to that moon-struck subaltern?"

He was, without question, jealous.

"I showed no favours," quietly answered Désirée, "that were not due to a gentleman."

"*Himmel!*" he cried. "You mean, I suppose, that I am no such thing?"

He thrust forward his chin in an arrogant manner, and stood as if waiting for an answer. Désirée looked at him quite steadfastly. Her voice was without emotion.

"I must confess," she said, "I do not suppose you are."

Von Hiegler's lower jaw dropped like a broken toy. For the better part of a minute his mouth remained quite open. His eyes were staring wide.

It was apparent that he was not at first able to believe the evidence of his ears. Since he spoke

and understood French quite indifferently, he no doubt thought for a moment that he had not heard aright.

"Pardon?" he gasped.

Désirée did not deign to answer. She merely bent down and rearranged a shawl about the shoulders of her grandmother, which exasperated the Prussian more than ever. He was like a baited bear.

Striding up to the table, he brought down his fist so violently that the champagne bottles jumped, and a glass fell to the floor and broke. In addition to the damage done, he so startled the astonished Richter—who was now quite fuddled with drink—that that officer jumped as though a shell had burst in the room.

"Mademoiselle," von Hiegler bellowed, "I'll teach you to treat your conquerors with respect. If I leave this house without an apology from your lips, I leave it—in flames."

"In order to prove to my satisfaction," Désirée rejoined, "that you are, monsieur, above all else, a gentleman?"

That was the last straw. Von Hiegler swept round the table, and raised his clenched fist to strike.

The expression on the man's face, which was livid with rage, was quite sufficient to show that he was not responsible for his actions. There is no question he would have struck the girl; and since he was a strong man, and quite beside him-



"THE YOUNG ENGLISHMAN DREW BACK HIS FIST AND STRUCK"

self, it is not pleasant to think what the results of such a blow would have been.

However, the blow never fell. His fist was raised. The girl had even lifted a forearm, with the natural instinct of self-protection, when Bob Cunningham, as blind as the Prussian himself to the consequences of his action, dashed through the opened casement window.

The young Englishman drew back his fist, and struck. The blow was well aimed, and all his strength was behind it. He caught the Prussian fair on the point of his square, protruding chin.

Von Hiegler let out a grunt, staggered backward, and then fell heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER VII

Arrested as a Spy

At that moment two things happened, each of which was something in the nature of a crisis.

In the first place the door was thrown open, and there stood Gerhardt and "the gallant Pomeranians". Secondly, Lieutenant Richter sprang to his feet, whipped his revolver from its holster, and fired.

Outside the window, in the garden where the rhododendrons grew, Private Sharp, with both his fists clenched tightly, made a movement forward, as if to rush into the room. He had no other thought than to hasten to the assistance of his comrade; and, indeed, would have done so, had it not been for D'Avignon, who grasped him by an arm.

"Don't be a fool!" let out the Frenchman, in a breathless whisper. "Do nothing rash. If you go there, you are taken prisoner."

"Am I to look on?" gasped Sharp.

"By no means," said the other. "Answer me this: Can you ride a motor-bicycle?"

"Yes," said Sharp; "I can. I worked in a cycle shop when I was on the reserve."

Hitherto the doctor had remained quite calm. He had seemed to be in complete possession of his presence of mind. He now spoke more quickly, in an excited manner, at the same time gesticulating with his hands.

"Return in all haste," he concluded. "There's not a moment to lose. Find the motor-bicycle; go back to your regiment, and tell the Colonel to hasten to our assistance."

Sharp glanced at D'Avignon's face, which was in the full light that issued from the window. The doctor's expression was that of a tortured man. No doubt, crippled and on crutches as he was, he recognized his utter helplessness.

"Make haste!" he cried again. "There's no time to lose."

Private Sharp waited no longer; but, turning quickly, set off running down the drive towards the gate.

In the meantime, in the dining-room, a calamity had taken place.

The report of Richter's revolver had been almost deafening to those within the room. There was a crash of broken glass, as the bullet, driving through a picture of the last Emperor of the French, buried itself deep in the brickwork of the wall. When the smoke cleared, it was seen that

Bob Cunningham was reeling backward, whilst the expression upon his face was that of one who suffers the severest pain.

Von Hiegler, springing to his feet, snatched his sword from its scabbard.

"He's hit!" he cried.

"Hands up!" roared Richter, levelling his revolver at the boy's head.

As Bob did not immediately obey, he would, no doubt, have fired, had not at that moment Désirée thrust herself between them.

"He cannot lift his hands," she cried. "See, his arm is broken!"

The truth of this was apparent. The boy's left arm hung helpless at his side. The bone was indeed fractured midway between the elbow and the wrist.

Richter let out a grunt, which might have been an expression of approval. At any rate, he returned his revolver to its holster, and, going to the table, poured out another glass of champagne, which he was actually about to drink, when von Hiegler swept it from the table with his sword.

"Enough of that, you fool!" he cried. "Follow me. There may be others in the garden. Gerhardt, keep an eye on the prisoner."

At that, a revolver in one hand and his sword in the other, he dashed through the window, with Richter close upon his heels.

At first they could see nothing, since their eyes were unaccustomed to the darkness. But by de-

grees they were able to make out the drive, with the tall trees on either hand. Some distance down the drive von Hiegler could just distinguish the figure of a man moving rapidly forward by means of a pair of crutches.

Letting out a loud shout, he started in pursuit, firing his revolver as he ran. It is, perhaps, unnecessary to say that the bullets flew in all directions. At the best of times, a revolver is not an easy weapon to use; and a man cannot expect to shoot straight when he is running fast, and when, moreover, it is so dark that it is barely possible to see.

D'Avignon did his utmost to escape. He held on upon his way, and even reached the gate where stood the two stone dragons and the burning lamp. By then the Prussian had emptied the chambers of his revolver. The night was still, except for the footsteps of the two running men and the continuous firing of the Fusiliers, somewhere in the wooded country to the north. D'Avignon was also able to hear the droning, rattling sound of a motor-bicycle, as Private Sharp hastened on his way.

The doctor turned in the direction of the bridge, but had not gone twenty paces before he was overtaken by the Prussian, who grasped him by the collar of his coat.

D'Avignon recognized at once that he was lost. He was unarmed and a cripple. There was nothing he could do. Without offering any show

of resistance, he consented to return with the two German officers to the house.

As he approached the casement window, he saw that Désirée was engaged in binding the young Englishman's broken arm to a short, home-made splint. The girl had had some training in first-aid ambulance work. Bob sat in a chair with his shirt-sleeve rolled to the shoulder. Near by was a basin, a sponge, and several bottles. Lieutenant Gerhardt stood at the girl's elbow, holding a safety-pin in a somewhat foolish manner. The room smelt of carbolic.

Von Hiegler, when he entered, did not appear to be at all pleased with the situation. He frowned, and thrust the doctor somewhat roughly into a chair.

"Stay there," said he. "Endeavour to escape, and I shoot."

At these words the girl, who had been wholly engrossed in her occupation, turned, and set eyes upon D'Avignon.

"Father!" she cried, and then wished she could take back the word.

Von Hiegler pricked up his ears.

"What's that?" he asked quite quickly. "So this man is your father? Is that so?"

"Yes," said Désirée.

"And may I ask what he was doing slinking like a dog-fox in the garden?"

No one answered. The Prussian turned to D'Avignon.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Henri D'Avignon. My daughter has spoken the truth. I am a doctor by profession, and offered my services to the Government at the outbreak of the war. I was wounded near Mulhausen, and was sent home in consequence of my wounds."

Von Hiegler seated himself upon the table and swung a dusty boot.

"And you think that I believe you?" he demanded.

"Believe me or not, as you like," said the other. "I have told you nothing but the truth."

"The truth!" exclaimed von Hiegler. "A pack of lies!" Then, pointing to the doctor, and addressing the two Pomeranians who still remained in the doorway, standing stiffly at attention, he cried out: "Arrest that man as a spy."

At that the girl, who had now finished bandaging Bob's arm, rose quickly to her feet. She was more pale than ever. There was something in the largeness and exceeding brightness of her eyes that made her face seem thin and even haggard.

"A spy!" she echoed. "It is not true."

"That is a question," said the Prussian, "that a court martial is well qualified to answer. For myself, I know no more than this: a man in civilian clothes is found hiding in the neighbourhood of a house where three German officers are snatching an hour's rest. That is enough for me."

"I swear to you," cried Désirée, "that you are

wrong. My father has told you the truth. I give you my word of honour."

"Mademoiselle," said the other, with a bow that was more than mockery, "it is unnecessary to speak of honour to one who has the misfortune not to be a gentleman. I arrest this man as a spy."

CHAPTER VIII

From Marne to Aisne

WHILST these events were in progress, Private Sharp—who, if the truth be told, was not altogether at home on Bob Cunningham's motor-bicycle—was flying northward on his way.

He did not have far to go before he fell in with a platoon of his own regiment, retiring in good order towards the bridge.

It was then dawn. The eastern sky-line was a long belt of red, streaked with dark, fish-bone clouds. As the daylight grew, the great battle of the Aisne, which was destined to last for so many fateful weeks, to extend to the terrific combat on the Yser and in the neighbourhood of Ypres, opened with the thunder of a thousand guns that echoed from Soissons to the northern slopes of the Alps.

Private Sharp little dreamed that he stood in the very midst of history in the making. That red dawn, indeed, was the inception of the greatest battle the world has ever seen. The destinies of nine nations were at stake; civilization itself, and all that stands for peace, and liberty, and progress,

trembled in the balance. From the German side, some miles away, the enormous siege guns that had wrought such terrible havoc upon the fortresses of Liége, Namur, and Maubeuge, tolled forth their messages of desolation and destruction. From the allied position the French "75's" rapped back their answer; whilst pieces of heavy ordnance, both French and English—naval guns, four-inch howitzers, and garrison artillery—filled the atmosphere with a continuous thudding sound that was like the footsteps of a legion of marching giants.

In that rich, wooded valley, where the vineyards trailed upon the southern slopes of hills, millions of men moved on to Armageddon. For the first time since the mobilization of both armies, the nations stood face to face in this colossal prize-ring. And once the gauntlet had been thrown down, once the die had been cast, there could be but one conclusion—one empire or another must crumble to the dust.

But Private Sharp did not concern himself with the destinies of nations. He and his pals were only pawns in the game; and knew it. They were the pawns, as others were the knights and queens and bishops, in the game wherein the eternal glory of empires is the prize.

Sharp, springing from his bicycle, addressed the sergeant in charge of the platoon, of whom he asked the whereabouts of the commanding officer.

The sergeant recognized him at once; for, as

chance had it, Sharp had stumbled upon his own company of the Wessex Fusiliers.

"Look here," said he, "I thought you'd gone to the rear—wounded."

"So I did," said Sharp; "but there's a job o' work to be done. Tell me, Sergeant, where's the Colonel?"

The sergeant pointed towards a hillock on the right of the road that was outlined against the dawn.

"Somewhere yonder," he answered. "What do you want him for?"

Sharp never stayed to answer, but, leaving the motor-bicycle in the road, set forward running through a narrow lane of vines.

He found the commanding officer seated on a broken gate scanning the valley to his front through a pair of field-glasses. On every hand was the sound of musketry, rapidly growing louder and louder as the daylight spread. Every now and then a bullet came singing by with a queer, two-noted whistle.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Private Sharp, "there's trouble—down by the bridge."

"Have you come from there?" asked the Colonel.

"Yussir. There's Germans in a shatto."

"About two hours ago," said the Colonel, "I sent a dispatch-rider—a motor-cyclist—to the bridge. Do you happen to have seen him?"

"Yussir," said Sharp; "'e's a prisoner."

"Has the bridge been blown up?"

"I don't think so, sir," said Sharp. "I've come from there myself, an' I didn't 'ear no explosion."

"You say there are Germans at the bridge?"

"Not at the bridge itself, sir, but at this 'ere shatto, so to speak. There's only a few of 'em, sir, an' a French gentleman sent me back to tell you as he thought the 'ouse might be surrounded."

"Very well," said the Colonel, who could not refrain from smiling, "we're falling back as quickly as we can, hoping to find the bridge intact. If this château is near the bridge, we might be able to take your Germans on the way."

Sharp saluted. He had left his rifle in the garden of the Château des Dragons, finding it painful to hold in his wounded hand, and desiring to run as swiftly as possible to the place where Cunningham had left his motor-bicycle.

As soon as he had gone the Colonel turned to his adjutant.

"Goldsmith," said he, "I think, in any case, we had better make sure of the bridge. Will you take B Company back to the river? We'll follow as quickly as we can."

A few minutes afterwards Captain and Adjutant Goldsmith placed himself in command of Private Sharp's company, which had now come to a halt on either side of the roadway. Keeping the men well extended, he ordered the whole line to retire.

In the meantime Sharp himself had recovered his motor-bicycle, on which he set off downhill on his return journey to the château. But he had not

gone far before he realized that during his absence something in the nature of a disaster had come to pass.

The château, as we know, stood in the middle of a group of trees which, in the half-light of dawn, appeared quite black against the sky-line. In the midst of these trees the soldier was able to see a score of flickering lights, which were rapidly becoming larger, more bright and constant. With alarming rapidity all these lights united; and a moment after a great flame shot skyward—a huge tongue of fire that was framed in myriads of dancing sparks and black clouds of smoke. The Château des Dragons was on fire.

Sharp waited to see no more, but at top speed rushed down the hill. He was about to turn in at the gate of the drive, when he came face to face with two women who had just then gained the roadway.

Désirée and her grandmother had left the château in the greatest haste. The girl, hatless, dressed in her simple black dress, held the arm of the old woman, who came forward walking slowly with the help of her stick. When she looked up and set eyes upon the soldier, Désirée stopped.

"The English are at hand?" she asked.

Sharp pointed towards the north.

"They're comin' along, miss," said he. "Toot de sweat."

"Too late!" said the girl. "The Germans have escaped."

"Which way?" cried Sharp.

"By the other road. They went off in the armoured car, taking with them as prisoners both the young Englishman and my father. As Captain von Hiegler left, he told me that there was little doubt my father would be shot as a spy."

During the last few hours the strain had been more than the girl was able to stand. She had risked her own life for the safety of another, who had been wounded before her eyes; she had seen her father arrested; and now, the home that she loved was in flames, and in an hour or so would be nothing but a ruin, black and charred. Even as she spoke, tears sprang into her eyes, and, recognizing the utter hopelessness of her position, she bowed her head, and breaking down completely, gave way to a flood of tears.

Private Sharp looked about him in distress.

"Don't take on about it, miss," said he. "All's well as ends well, as the poet says. Don't be down-'earted, mamzelle."

Sharp was obviously very ill at ease. He shifted repeatedly upon his feet, and, taking off his forage-cap, changed it awkwardly from hand to hand, and then readjusted the badge.

"I remember 'earing a story," he went on, "about a bloke wot thought 'e'd lost 'is mother. It was like this 'ere. They was going to a station to catch an excursion train; and when they arrived on the platform, there was the train goin' out. Well, miss, this bloke jumps into a first-class car-

riage, though 'e'd only got a third-class ticket; and when 'e looks about 'im, lo and be'old, 'is mother wasn't there! 'Blime!' says he. 'She's tumbled out.' 'E took on about it somethin' chronic; so that by the time 'e got to London, 'e was 'ardly responsible for 'is actions. 'E'd got a bit of money in his pocket, an' 'e'd no sooner got out of the train than 'e went straight off and bought a revolver, a rope, and a packet o' poison. When night come, 'e went to the 'Ungerford Bridge and tied a slip-knot round 'is neck. When 'e 'ad done that, 'e swallowed the poison, an' jumped off of the bridge, at the same time shootin' at 'isself with the revolver."

Sharp paused for the necessary dramatic effect.

"'Ow about that?" said he.

Désirée, who had now got the better of her feelings, confessed that the situation was certainly alarming.

"Yus, miss," said Sharp. "And would you believe wot 'appened? When that chap loosed off with 'is revolver, meanin' to shoot 'isself in the 'ead, 'e missed, and cut the rope, one end of which was tied round 'is neck, and the other to one of the girders of the bridge. 'E went into the water with a splash; an' 'is mouth bein' open, 'e swallowed about a quart. Strange to relate, that made 'im sick; and just as 'e 'ad satisfactorily disposed of the poison wot 'e'd took, 'e was picked up by a passing boat. It turned out afterwards, miss, that 'is mother 'ad stayed be'ind to 'ave an argument

with a paper-boy about whether she'd given 'im a penny or a 'alfpenny. Avvy-vous compree?"

"Perfectly," said Désirée. "You mean that it is too soon to despair, and perhaps you are right. But where are we to go for safety?"

"Trust to me," said Sharp, "and I'll make it all right. I'll look after you, miss, or my name ain't Private 'Ercules Sharp, and I don't know no more ettiket than a company cook."

Saying this, Private Sharp figuratively took the two ladies under his wing. Literally, taking both the old lady and Désirée by an arm, he led them towards the bridge. There, no living soul was to be seen. The sun was now high and bright; and the broad daylight made the burning château seem less terrible than before. They reached the road on the southern bank of the river in safety, and there climbed up the hill.

On the crest-line they sat down at the roadside to rest, for the old lady was too fatigued to go any farther. Thence, from a position by no means safe, they witnessed the combat that now closed in upon them from either side like a flood.

The Wessex Fusiliers were driven back upon the river. Here and there, amid the trees that surrounded the château, small khaki figures showed up from time to time, whilst the continuous sound of musketry grew nearer and more loud.

And then an aeroplane passed, soaring at a height of about six thousand feet. It circled over the position occupied by the Germans, and then

returned towards the south; and soon after that there came the report of a great gun, and a shell screamed overhead, to burst beyond the château in a great cloud of dust and smoke.

Taking advantage of the bridge that had been saved so heroically by Bob, the Fusiliers had begun to cross the river in small parties, when Sir Henry Cole's brigade bore down upon the position. Both from the right and left, batteries opened fire, and from far in the rear two heavy guns pounded the enemy with shell. The retreat of the Fusiliers was stayed as the back-rush of a spent wave is carried forward by the tide. One after the other the English regiments crossed the river, and opened out upon the northern bank. In less than an hour the fight was rolling northward, the sound of the musketry was dying away in the distance, as the Germans fell back upon their main position on the Aisne.

In the meantime Private Sharp had hailed a peasant, who was driving a farm cart to some place of safety. In the cart were two children—for the man was a widower—and the greater part of his household belongings — cooking utensils, mattresses, and bundles of clothes.

This man agreed to take the two ladies to Rheims. But it was not until long after nightfall that they entered the great cathedral city, the old-world streets of which were thronged with troops, baggage trains, and transport. Thence, the following morning, they took train to Paris, where

Sharp left Désirée and her grandmother at the house of one of their friends, and then went to report himself at an English hospital. There his wound was dressed and bandaged; and, a few days afterwards, with his arm in a sling and a broad smile upon his countenance, he presented himself before Désirée.

The girl rose and held out a hand, which Sharp took somewhat awkwardly. Old Madame D'Avignon, who could not speak English, greeted the soldier with a smile of recognition and a bow.

"My grandmother and I," said Désirée, "wish to know what happened the other day. We were able to see nothing, though we were nearly deafened by the noise."

"It was like this 'ere," said Private Sharp. "The Germans was on the run, and we got orders to follow 'em up at every cost. One regiment, pushing on too quickly, became detached from the others, and would 'ave been cut off 'ad it not been for my friend, Mister Cunningham."

"It was he who saved the bridge?" asked Désirée, with eagerness.

"'E did that," said Private Sharp; "but 'ow 'e done it, no one knows. By means of that there bridge, the brigade was able to follow up the pursuit, to keep the Germans on the move. I reckon that chap ought to git the Victoria Cross."

"He should, indeed," said Désirée. "But where is he now, and where is my father?"

"Miss," said Sharp, "it ain't no good askin'

questions wot can't be answered. As far as we are able to tell, they're on the way to Berlin."

Désirée got slowly to her feet. As she spoke, she looked out of the window towards the tall spire of a church that towered above the roofs of adjacent houses.

"If it costs me my life," she said, "I will do my best to save them."

CHAPTER IX

Cross-examined

As Captain von Hiegler returned to the château, with Richter and D'Avignon, he became conscious of the fact that the sound of musketry was nearer than he liked. The English battalion on the northern bank of the river was evidently falling back upon the bridge, and, if he did not make good his escape at once, he might experience some difficulty in doing so.

For a variety of reasons, he was not in the best of tempers. In an abrupt and sullen manner, he ordered the two ladies to take their departure without delay, as he was about to set fire to the house.

For this act of vandalism he himself was responsible. Though Gerhardt offered no remonstrance, it was apparent that the young lieutenant did not approve. Both Bob Cunningham and Dr. D'Avignon were bundled into the motor-car, where they were placed in charge of the two Pomeranian guards.

Beneath the ambulance hood there was a kind of

semi-darkness. The car, which was about the size of a one-ton lorry, was accommodated with four seats which, with the exception of the driver's seat, were nothing better than ordinary wooden planks. Cunningham, by reason of the intense pain he suffered from his wound, is never likely to forget that journey.

They started off at the rate of about thirty miles an hour, travelling over rough cobble-stones which shook the car like a rattle. After a while, von Hiegler gave orders that the hood was to be lowered. They were evidently nearing the German position. For half an hour they ran through an open, rolling country, and then came to a long ridge upon which thousands of German soldiers were digging trenches.

Farther on, the roads which led to the north and to the east were blocked by columns of troops, huge convoys, regiments of cavalry, batteries of artillery, ammunition trains, and field hospitals.

On beholding the two prisoners, the German soldiers did not attempt to disguise their feelings of delight. For more than five hours Bob and D'Avignon had to run the gauntlet through an avenue of scoffing and derision.

By that time they found themselves in the black country on the borders of France and Belgium, the great mining district between Lille and Charleroi which rivals South Wales or Sheffield. It was in this neighbourhood that the first pitched battle of the war had taken place.

It was nightfall when von Hiegler's car entered the devastated city of Charleroi. However, he decided to push on in all haste to Brussels. He was a gentleman whose custom it was to consider his own personal comfort; and he was determined that evening to dine and sleep in a good hotel.

It was quite dark when the car raced across the field of Waterloo; and an hour later they found themselves in the half-deserted capital of Belgium. Von Hiegler went straight to the general headquarters, where he received his orders. The captives were thence conducted to a prison, where—though both were wounded—they were accommodated in an ordinary cell, made more or less habitable by two beds, a table, and a few chairs.

In this place, where they received excellent medical attendance, they were detained for three weeks; until, one morning, Lieutenant Gerhardt entered, well-groomed and shaved, the scabbard of his sword polished as bright as silver.

"Monsieur is well?" he asked of D'Avignon, speaking in broken French.

"Quite well," said the other. "But I fail to understand how it is that my companion and I are treated like a pair of felons."

"You are charged with being a spy," said the German.

"Then," answered D'Avignon, "I would like to know when I am to have an opportunity of proving my innocence. At any rate, my comrade is an ordinary prisoner of war."

"Of that I know nothing," said the Lieutenant. "He is detained by order of the Chief of the Intelligence Department of the General Staff, who desires to see him at once."

At that, Lieutenant Gerhardt turned to Bob.

"You will be so good as to follow me," said he, and moved towards the door.

Bob did as he was told, and immediately found himself surrounded by armed guards. Hedged in by fixed bayonets, he was conducted along a passage, across a courtyard, and into a wide hall, in which the cross-beams and the panelling furnished examples of that exquisite wood-carving for which the Flemish were formerly so distinguished.

In the centre of the room was a large mahogany table, at which were seated, side by side, three German officers.

Bob took in his surroundings at a glance. One of the officers was von Hiegler, who sat on the right hand of a stout, grey-headed colonel, with pince-nez and a moustache trained after the fashion set by his Emperor.

"What is your name?" asked the Colonel, dipping a pen into a large leaden inkpot.

Bob answered fearlessly, speaking the truth, and looking his inquisitor straight in the eyes.

"I understand," said the Colonel, "that you are a dispatch-rider to Major-General Sir Henry Cole, commanding an infantry brigade."

The prisoner said that this was so.

"Very well," said the Colonel, who spoke Eng-

lish exceedingly well; "there are a few questions I would like to ask you."

At that he laid down his pen, and, placing his finger-tips together, leaned back in his chair, regarding Bob over the top of his spectacles.

"You have a good memory?" he asked.

"I believe so."

"Good! That is good. Since the beginning of the campaign, no doubt, you have carried several messages for your General? Two or three each day, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Bob.

"No doubt," said the Colonel, "if you tried, you could remember many of the messages which you have taken?"

"No doubt," answered Bob, who now saw the drift of this cross-examination.

"There are a few questions I would like to ask," the Colonel went on, "in regard to the position of the British forces."

"Sir," said Bob, "I should spare yourself the trouble. You can ask me questions till the crack of doom. You will get no answer. You cannot force me to tell you anything, because I am determined not to speak."

At that von Hiegler struck the table with his fist and cried: "You seem to forget to whom you are speaking."

"Not at all," said Bob. "I speak to the enemies of my king and country. I refuse to render you the least assistance."

"Hold your tongue!" let out the Prussian.

"That," said Bob, "is exactly what I propose to do."

"Tut, tut!" exclaimed the Colonel in a peevish voice. He had now taken off his pince-nez, and was playing with them in his hands. "Be reasonable. There are only a few things we wish to know. If you answer truthfully, I promise you you will be treated with great consideration during the term of your captivity. We know pretty nearly everything concerning the allied armies. We know the dispositions of your divisions and brigades. We are not quite sure, however, what regiments are brigaded together. You can surely understand that, by telling us that, you are not harming the cause for which you fought."

"I fail to understand anything of the sort," said Bob. "What you require is information that is likely to be extremely valuable to you."

"How so?" exclaimed the Colonel, throwing out his hands in well-feigned amazement.

Bob could not refrain from laughing outright.

"Sir," said he, "if the information you require is of no value to yourself, why do you require it?"

"You are not here to ask questions," roared von Hiegler, "but to answer them."

"And I have already told you," said the prisoner, "that I propose to do no such thing."

The Colonel snatched up his pen, and jammed it so violently into the inkpot that he broke the nib.

"March him out!" he cried, with a thick, gut-

tural German oath. "March him out; and bring in that cursed French spy!"

As he was conducted back to his cell, Bob, who was exceedingly satisfied with the result of his own interview, had no such confidence in the fate of his good friend D'Avignon. He had to confess that the doctor had been captured in somewhat suspicious circumstances.

D'Avignon was in civilian clothes; and, as unhappy Belgium could testify, the Germans had a fondness for summary capital punishment upon the merest shreds of evidence.

They found the Frenchman seated on his small truckle-bed, which stood against the wall. On the entry of Gerhardt, who was still in command of the guard, he looked up and smiled.

"Monsieur," said Gerhardt, "you are about to be put on trial for your life."

"Good!" said the other. "I am well prepared."

The young Saxon seemed to hesitate.

"You do not fear death?" he asked.

"For myself, no," said the Frenchman, "because I am innocent. For my daughter, yes. War would be a different matter were it not for mothers, sweethearts, and wives."

Lieutenant Gerhardt sighed.

"That is indeed so," said he.

He made a motion of a hand towards the door. D'Avignon went out. Bob saw the glittering bayonets of the guard; and then the door was slammed and bolted from the other side.

Bob stood listening to their footsteps, growing fainter and fainter along the passage. When all was silent, he seated himself upon a chair, resting his chin in a hand. In his mind's eye he saw the infuriated Colonel whom he had baited like a bull. He saw von Hiegler, a man who would stick at nothing, in the composition of whose nature there was not one drop of the milk of human kindness. He knew already of the disciplined brutality of their captors. He knew well enough that, since the beginning of the war, hundreds of innocent people had been shot on bare suspicion. He had learned to love D'Avignon, for more reasons than is necessary to suggest; and despite himself, he trembled for the gallant Frenchman's life.

The afternoon advanced; the cell grew darker, as the sun sank in the sky. A soldier came, and brought food, which the prisoner did not touch. At last he sat alone in impenetrable darkness, and still D'Avignon did not come.

CHAPTER X

The Girl with the Cakes

How long Bob waited he was never able to say. It might have been that, seated upon the hard prison bed, he fell asleep. At any rate he was dozing, when the door was thrown open and he was blinded by the strong light of a lantern.

By degrees, in the open doorway, beyond which stood the armed German guards, he made out the tall, thin figure of D'Avignon, leaning upon his crutches. Then the door closed, and once again he found himself in darkness.

"You have waited long, my friend," came the doctor's voice from somewhere within the cell.

"What news?" asked Cunningham. "They have sentenced you to death?"

D'Avignon laughed.

"They would have done so," said he, "had von Hiegler had his way. As it was, Gerhardt spoke on my behalf. He was able to prove that I was the master of the Château des Dragons, and when arrested was guilty of no greater crime than returning to my home."

"How could he prove that?" asked Bob.

"Monsieur," said the doctor, in his quiet voice, "there is a factor in the affairs of men that plays an important part, and which goes by the name of Love. We could not get on without it, I suppose. I have every reason to believe that Lieutenant Gerhardt has fallen in love with my daughter. That is his affair, not ours—his affair, and my daughter's. At all events, wishing to take with him some memento of her kindness, he possessed himself of one of her pocket-handkerchiefs which fell to the floor when she was engaged in dressing your wound. This handkerchief was marked with her name, Désirée D'Avignon. As for me, letters were found upon my person proving that my name also was D'Avignon. It was only circumstantial evidence, of course, but good enough for the court. Von Hiegler would have shot me out of hand, but—fortunately for me—the President was not blind to his responsibilities."

"And what is to become of us now?" asked Bob.

"I know no more than Gerhardt has told me," said D'Avignon. "It appears that we are to be sent to Germany as prisoners of war."

No news could have been more distasteful to the young Englishman. He had often viewed the possibility of being killed or wounded, but it had never occurred to him that he might be doomed to spend the long months that must intervene before the end of the war in some German garrison or fortress.

"When do we go?" he asked.

"To-morrow."

"By train?"

"I think not," said D'Avignon. "As far as I can make out, the railroads from Brussels to Liége are fully occupied with supplies and ammunition going one way, and hospital trains the other. I believe we are to march by road to the German frontier."

Soon after that they lay down and slept for the few hours that remained till daybreak. When the first light of dawn was creeping through the narrow window of the prison cell, a German sergeant entered, jangling a bunch of keys in one hand and carrying a cavalry sabre in the other.

"Prepare yourselves for a journey," he commanded.

There was something of irony in the order. Since the prisoners had neither baggage nor change of clothing, no preparations were possible. They were presented with a small basin of water in which to wash; but as they had neither towel nor soap, their object was not attained without discomfort.

At about ten o'clock the same sergeant returned, and ordered them to leave at once. Outside they found a party of five bearded soldiers.

These men, who were all war-worn and footsore, were being sent to the rear to rest. They had come down from the trenches on the Aisne. Their clothes were in tatters and plastered with mud. They were quite willing to confess that, when they

arrived in Brussels, they had had little or nothing to eat for several days.

Since there was no motor-car available, the party, which was under the command of the sergeant, set out upon the journey in a large Flemish wagon, drawn by two magnificent horses. The sergeant and his five men, as well as the two wounded prisoners, travelled in the wagon, in which was a large quantity of hay, that served the double purpose of forage for the horses and bedding for the travellers. It is unnecessary to describe in any detail their journey through the stricken fields of Belgium.

That evening, soon after nightfall, they arrived at Louvain—a name that will stand to an eternity, graven in the blood-red letters of dishonour upon the heart of the German Empire. This ancient seat of learning, one of the most historic towns in Europe, had been battered to the dust. Its streets, strewn with debris—broken bricks, charred wood, and plaster—were those of a city of the dead. Louvain, in the moonlight, was like some chill domain in the silent land of ghosts.

On the outskirts of the ruined town the German soldiers purchased some food from the Belgian peasants. They slept on the farm-wagon, and the following morning continued on their journey.

They had not gone far before they met upon the roadway a sunburnt Flemish girl. She belonged to the very poor. She was bare of foot; her skirt, which was made of a kind of sackcloth,

was all rags and tatters. Over her head was a shawl.

She carried a basket in which were a dozen flat cakes, evidently made of rice. It was the German sergeant himself who was the first to set eyes upon the cakes. They were then upon the main road which leads from Louvain to Tirlemont.

"How much for your cakes?" he asked.

But as he spoke in German the girl was not able to understand.

The sergeant turned to D'Avignon.

"Speak to her in French," said he.

D'Avignon did so, but the girl knew no more French than German. For all that, it was not difficult to make her understand by signs that they wished to buy her cakes.

One after the other, both soldiers and prisoners, climbed down from the wagon. The girl was not willing to sell all she had; for, as she made them to understand, she herself was hungry, and the country had been laid waste in such a manner as Europe had never seen since the campaigns of Cæsar.

Bob Cunningham, who was ravenous, had purchased one of the rice-cakes, and was about to take a mouthful, when something happened that would have tried the patience of Job. As it was it was all the boy could do to refrain from round abuse. The girl took off the shawl about her head and shoulders as if to re-arrange it; and in doing so, she brushed the cake from Bob's hand, so that it fell into

the mud that lay inches deep upon the roadway.

Cunningham did his best to keep his temper; but since he had had little or no food during the last twenty-four hours, this was no easy matter. The incident was not observed by the German soldiers, who were now sitting by the roadside, devouring their cakes like so many famished wolves.

The cakes were stale and tasted a trifle musty. For all that they were welcome enough, and it was not long before the sergeant was demanding more. D'Avignon, who had put his cake into his pocket, was leaning upon his crutches, staring hard at the girl.

"We wish for more," said the sergeant, speaking his own language slowly and distinctly.

And even as the words left his lips, he was seen to reel like a drunken man. Steadying himself with difficulty, he passed a hand across his eyes, and then, without a sound, fell forward on his face.

Whilst this was happening, the behaviour of the five soldiers was no less remarkable. Three made some small attempt to rise, and then fell backward as though they had dropped off to sleep. One got to his feet, and set off running, crying out in a loud voice that he was poisoned. He had not gone far before he toppled over, and lay quite still upon the roadway. As for the other, he shook his fist at the girl, and then looked about him for his rifle, which he had laid down upon the ground. As he stooped to pick it up, he, too, fell forward in a kind of faint, and lay huddled and quite motionless.

Bob Cunningham turned upon the girl.

"You have murdered them!" he cried in horror.

"No, monsieur," she answered in the best of English. "They are only drugged—nothing more serious than that."

Then she laughed, and bringing her two hands together, rocked from side to side.

D'Avignon came forward and caught her by the shoulders.

"Désirée!" he cried, "it is you!"

"Yes, father," she answered, "it is I. Come, follow me. We have no time to waste."

CHAPTER XI

Through the German Lines

Bob Cunningham could not, at first, believe that he did not dream. He stared at Désirée in amazement. Though—when she spoke in English—he had recognized her voice, and had seen her father seize her in his arms, he could not believe that this was the same girl who had helped him to escape from the château. Her disguise was almost perfect. She had stained her face, her hands and bare feet, to the colour of tan. The clothes she wore must have been borrowed from some peasant woman; for they were exactly similar to those worn by the refugees who had passed them on the road.

"Mademoiselle D'Avignon!" he exclaimed.

"It is myself," she laughed.

"But how did you come here?"

"I have no time to tell you now," she said; "every minute we delay we are in danger."

"We cannot go back to Brussels," cried the doctor. "That would mean certain capture."

"Follow me at once," said Désirée, leaving the roadway, and striking out across country towards

the north. "It cannot be long before these poor fools are discovered. And then the Germans will take up the pursuit." She pointed to the soldiers who lay in various attitudes of insensibility.

"You are sure they are all right?" asked D'Avignon.

"Father," said the girl, "you must not forget that I am the daughter of a doctor. I have often asked you questions, as you know. I have no one but yourself to thank, if my memory is a good one. I remembered what you told me of Indian hemp, and in Brussels I bought some *Cannabis indica* from a chemist. But before that I had disguised myself, as you see, and had had no difficulty in passing through the German lines. I came north by road, walking many miles, but sometimes getting a lift on the carts and wagons of refugees. I arrived at Brussels yesterday afternoon, where I recognized our good friend, Monsieur Leconte.

"As soon as it was dark," the girl went on, "I went to see Leconte, who told me that you were in the prison. I thereupon made it my business to be charming to Captain von Hiegler, from whom I tried to obtain a passport. He did not recognize me, and as I pretended to be able to speak nothing but Flemish, of which he knew but a few words, our conversation was fraught with difficulties and danger. However, I managed to glean all the information I wanted; I learnt that you were both to leave Brussels to-day, by road.

"Accordingly, I purchased some rice and a little

flour, which was very difficult to obtain, with which to make my rice cakes. I mixed the Indian hemp with water. Your guards will recover all right; but I am afraid the dose was too strong, and they will be very ill."

All this time they were hurrying forward, across a flat field of roots, on the farther side of which was a wood. D'Avignon could not walk so fast as the others, since his crutches often sank several inches deep in the soft, loamy soil. When they gained the wood, the doctor was obliged to pause for breath.

"That was smart work, Désirée," said he.

"There was no other way to rescue you," she answered. "Once you were past Liége, you were lost. I could not hope to cross the Meuse. All the bridges are guarded."

Bob Cunningham placed both hands upon his dirt-stained khaki uniform.

"I am lost," said he, "if I'm seen in this. A change of clothes is necessary."

"I have arranged for that," said the girl. "Leconte himself is at a small cottage on the other side of this wood. He has disguises for you both."

"Leconte!" let out D'Avignon. "The best-hearted fellow in the world! But I should have thought that he was the last person to risk his life for anyone."

"You should not judge by appearances," said Désirée. "In these days, we find that there are more brave men in little Belgium alone than I

thought the whole world contained. Monsieur Leconte may be fat and very red in the face, and fond of a good dinner and the best of wine, but that does not mean he is a coward. Of his own free will he volunteered not only to meet you here, but to take you in his motor-car towards Diest. He assured me it would be easier for you to escape towards the north, to endeavour to reach Antwerp."

"Come!" cried D'Avignon, "I wish to shake by the hand my old friend, Auguste Leconte."

Swinging himself forward upon his crutches, he hastened through the wood, his daughter and the young Englishman following close upon his heels.

Presently, they came to a narrow lane, by the side of which was a strip of cultivated land. A little farther on was a cottage with a thatched roof, before the gate of which stood an enormous racing-car, the body of which was painted canary yellow.

"That's Leconte's car!" let out D'Avignon. "I would know it anywhere."

Désirée, running forward, passed through the gate, and without knocking, threw open the cottage door and entered.

She found herself in a little room, the ceiling of which was so low that a tall man could not have stood upright beneath the beams. This room was at once a kitchen and a parlour. There was a small table upon which a white table-cloth had been laid, and plates, knives, and forks. A bright fire burned in the kitchen stove, upon which stood a saucepan, a frying-pan, and a kettle.

A thin, middle-aged woman was busy cooking, stirring something that was in the saucepan, whence issued a cloud of steam that smelt deliciously of soup. Standing at her elbow was a little fat man, who had evidently taken upon himself the duties of a maître d'hôtel.

"Not too much salt!" he was saying. "You can put salt in, but you cannot take it out. Come, come, my good woman; let me taste it."

The woman, with a sad smile, held out a large leaden spoon, which the little, fat man thrust forthwith into his mouth. And no sooner had he done so than he jumped across the room like an india-rubber ball.

"Là, là!" he exclaimed. "It is too hot!"

"It tastes good, monsieur?" asked the woman, smiling.

"It tastes of nothing but heat," cried the other. "It tastes—like a red-hot poker."

Then he set eyes upon D'Avignon, and threw out both his fat, little hands.

"Mon ami!" he exclaimed. "You are safe! I rejoice that you are safe."

And at that, he embraced the doctor with the greatest enthusiasm, kissing him violently on either cheek, and on the bridge of his nose.

"All is prepared," he went on. "I have brought clothes—the clothes of a peasant—both for yourself and the Englishman. We were preparing a meal for you, for, no doubt, you are famished. When you have disguised yourselves and have had some-

thing to eat, I will take you towards Diest. Farther than that I doubt if I can go. We may not be able to pass the examining posts which are stationed on all roads around Malines."

D'Avignon laid a hand on the little man's shoulder.

"You have risked your life in coming here," said he.

"Pooh! That is nothing," said Leconte. "Understand this, I live but for one thing: to kill a German. I cannot shoot straight; I am too fat to wield a bayonet or a sword; yet, none the less, I mean some day—to kill a German. That is my ambition, my dream. For that day I live."

The extraordinary enthusiasm of Monsieur Leconte was such that Bob Cunningham could hardly refrain from smiling. When he was formally presented, he bowed, and said that he hoped that Monsieur would some day get his wish.

In the meantime Désirée, assisted by the woman, had opened a small portmanteau, in which she discovered two suits of clothes, neither very new nor very clean. Presenting these to Bob and her father, she told them to go upstairs and change as quickly as they could.

As soon as they had gone, she offered her assistance to the maître d'hôtel. Leconte, however, was evidently under the impression that he needed no instructions where the art of cooking was concerned. He would allow Désirée to touch nothing, not even the saucepan or the poker.

He was apparently one of those individuals who are physically incapable of keeping still. He buzzed about like a blue-bottle, and never ceased talking for a single instant. He held forth at length upon the nutritious effect of soup. He re-arranged the table a score of times. He was apparently extremely short-sighted; for, not only did he wear an enormous pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, but was obliged almost to touch everything that he desired to see with the tip of his nose. He would pick up a soup plate, to see that it was clean, and then polish it violently upon the sleeve of his coat.

By profession, Monsieur Leconte described himself as a "spécialiste de réparations de l'horlogerie"—in other words, a watchmaker. In these troublous times, however, nobody cared much about the time, and Monsieur Leconte had lost his profession. For that, he was none the worse. He was a man of considerable means. It was many years since he himself had mended a watch; he had become both too short-sighted, and too rich. He had made a fortune out of old Dutch chronometers and clocks, and for the last few years had allowed others to carry on his business for him, whilst he devoted himself to motoring. Whatever else he was, he was one of the finest drivers in Belgium. He was well able to see such obstacles as carts or sudden turnings; but small objects on the road, such as ducks or chickens, were altogether beneath his notice. He prided himself upon the havoc his car had wrought upon the farmyards of Western Flan-

ders. If you met Leconte in the best of tempers, his hat set jauntily on one side of his head, his red face wreathed in smiles, you might rest assured that he had killed another chicken. He always stopped, and paid the owner handsomely; but this seemed rather to increase than to diminish his excessive ardour. Before the war, it was his great ambition to slay a goose. At the outbreak of hostilities, this goose was ousted by a German.

When Bob Cunningham and D'Avignon descended the stairs, they were admirably disguised as Flemish peasants. Monsieur Leconte laughed loudly and clapped his hands.

"Magnificent!" he cried. "No one would know you. You will be able to pass without difficulty through the German lines. And now, you must all three sit down and eat. There is no knowing when and where you will obtain your next meal."

Leconte himself refused to eat, protesting that he was not hungry. He insisted upon waiting upon Désirée, her father, and the young Englishman, though, in point of fact, he did little more than bob about in front of the woman, to whom he gave the most minute and unnecessary instructions, and who eventually lost her temper and told him to get out of her way.

At this the little man was not in the least put out. He merely seated himself in a chair, and suggested that, as soon as they had finished their meal, they should start upon their journey.

In case the car should be captured, or the cottage

searched by Uhlans after their departure, they took the precaution of burning both Bob's khaki uniform and D'Avignon's civilian clothes. That done, they seated themselves in Leconte's canary-coloured car, Désirée in the front seat and Bob and the doctor behind; and after Leconte had paid the woman for her kindness and assistance, they set off upon the road to Diest, one of the main points in the Brussels line-of-defence which had given way beneath the weight of the first German advance.

As they approached the town it drew near to sunset, and, wishing to avoid the examining posts of the enemy, they turned towards the west, taking a narrow country lane where it was not possible to travel faster than twenty miles an hour. Should they be stopped and questioned, their danger would be extreme. Disguised as they were as Flemish peasants, there was little doubt that they would be shot at sight if their identity was discovered, and that the girl would share the fate of her companions.

Leconte was breathless with excitement. Even when they were passing in broad daylight a large tract of open country, where there was no scrap of cover of any sort, he deemed it necessary to talk in whispers. Now that it was growing dark, he carried a finger to his lips, conjuring Désirée to keep silent if she set the slightest value on her life, though the car was making as much noise as an empty motor-lorry.

Leaving the lights of Diest to the south-east, they

ran due north towards Lierre. Weeks had passed since they had last heard the firing on the Aisne, and they were now reminded that they were approaching another scene of operations. From the direction of the valley of the Nethe, there came the thudding sound of heavy guns. Without doubt an attack was being delivered from Malines upon the outer ring of forts that encircled the city of Antwerp. On a sudden a voice rang out in the darkness in the guttural accents of a German:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

A red lantern flashed before them on the road. Leconte pulled up in the nick of time, to find himself confronted by a deep ditch surrounded by barbed-wire entanglement.

The light came forward; and presently a German officer appeared at the side of the car, whilst a soldier held the lantern close to their faces.

"Who are you?" said the officer.

Leconte spoke a little German.

"My card," said he, producing a letter-case and presenting the officer with a business card of enormous dimensions, upon which was printed the following legend:

RÉPARATIONS SOIGNÉES ET GARANTIES

PIÈCES COMPLIQUÉES—CHRONOMÈTRES

EUGENE AUGUSTE LECONTE

SPÉCIALISTE DE RÉPARATIONS D'HORLOGERIE,
BRUXELLES.

"I'm a watchmaker," said he.

"So you say," said the officer, "you say so three times. And where are you going now?"

"I go to Antwerp," said Leconte.

"I think not," said the other. "I have orders to allow no one to pass. Who are these people, these peasants?"

"Refugees," said Leconte. "I picked them up upon the road."

The officer, with a grunt, turned to the sergeant of the guard.

"Search the car," said he. "Make them turn out their pockets."

It was fortunate they had thought of burning their old clothes, and of bringing nothing with them that might have given rise to suspicion; otherwise, their identity would have been discovered. Even as it was, the officer seemed somewhat loath to let them go.

"You cannot pass," said he, "because there is fighting in the direction of Lierre. You must go back by whichever way you came."

Leconte feigned to be sorely disappointed, though as a matter of fact he was congratulating himself on an exceedingly narrow escape. Grumbling audibly, he backed the car, and then sailed away into the darkness.

This time he took a by-road leading to the north. From this they made three attempts to get to the westward; but each time they were warned by a red lantern in the darkness that one of the enemy's examining posts was close at hand.

"It's no good," said Leconte at last. "You must endeavour to get through on foot. Strike out across country, and trust to Providence. The roads are too well guarded."

There was, indeed, no other course for them to take; and bidding good-bye to their benefactor, Désirée and her companions set forward into the darkness.

That was a night that not one of the three is ever likely to forget. It was pitch dark. In the sky were neither stars nor moon. Moreover, a part of their journey led them through wooded country, where there was no means of knowing whether or not they were going in the right direction.

To guide them they had only the constant, grumbling sound of the guns. Hour by hour this ceaseless thunder continued, growing louder and louder as they approached the famous canal which joins the Schelde to the Meuse.

At about ten o'clock they halted to consult together. D'Avignon, who never complained of being tired, protested that he was well able to continue walking on his crutches. Bob Cunningham, whose wound was still painful, was weak and in ill health; but he, too, refused to admit that he was almost overcome by fatigue.

Towards daybreak they found themselves in a wood, due east of Lierre. The sound of the firing was now almost deafening. They were evidently quite close to the German lines; for, somewhere

quite near at hand, the report of a great howitzer made the earth tremble under their feet.

In the grey light of morning Bob Cunningham, from the skirting of a wood which stood upon a narrow ridge, looked down upon a green field, in one corner of which was the great gun itself. He could see the gunners in Prussian grey, laughing and talking amongst themselves as they went about their duties. Near at hand was a table where three German officers sat at breakfast. At long intervals the great cannon spoke, with a report that was like a thunder-clap, whilst the enormous shell was sent shrieking and hooting on its way, to burst ten miles distant in the midst of the Belgian lines.

All day long, without food, the three fugitives remained hidden among the trees. Two slept while the third kept watch; and by nightfall all three had obtained sufficient sleep.

Then it was that they set forth once more, this time moving in a westerly direction. They advanced with the utmost caution. All night long the firing continued. They gave the guns as wide a berth as possible.

At last the sound of the firing was all around them. They were in the very heart of the German position. For all that, they had as yet seen no one. They had every reason to hope that they would get through in safety.

Each group of guns or battery that they passed, as they drew nearer to the Belgian lines, was of lighter calibre than the one before. The great

howitzers were now far behind, and their shells could be heard shrieking high overhead, making the night hideous and terrible. They passed smaller howitzers and heavy garrison guns, pieces of field artillery, and finally little nine-pounders that were vigorously plying the Belgian trenches with shell.

They knew then that they were near the German infantry; and presently they could see the reflection of many small fires burning in the trenches. There was no musketry, for the two forces lay beyond rifle range of one another.

When they knew they were clear of the German lines they went on more quickly, casting discretion to the winds. They passed a picket to the right, and a little farther on almost ran into a reconnoitring patrol. Indeed, they were obliged to lie down upon the ground until the soldiers had gone.

The country was quite flat; and only here and there around the villages were small clumps of trees, which in the darkness took upon themselves weird, unearthly shapes. D'Avignon was obliged to rest. Désirée, who was anxious to get on, stood by, her hands clasped together. The incessant shell-fire was beginning to tell upon her nerves. They stood midway between the two lines; and from either side shells flew above them in such quick succession, and in such numbers, that it was as if the atmosphere were alive. The whole night was filled with shrieks.

After a while they went on again, stumbling forward in the darkness. Suddenly, from immediately

in front of them, a score of dark forms leapt from out of the ground, and a voice rang out—an English voice—which was like music in their ears.

"Hands up! Lay down your arms!"

"We're friends!" cried Bob.

"Friends! We've heard that yarn before. Hands up, or we shoot."

Bob went forward, holding up his hands; and a moment after an electric lamp was flashed into his face.

In a few brief words he told his story to an English officer of Marines, who showed them the best and the safest route to take to Antwerp.

They were now in greater danger than they had ever been before; for, between the outer and the inner ring of forts, the German shells were bursting in profusion. To the left a village was on fire. On all sides shrapnel flashed in the night; and in the light of the explosions they could see the white clouds of smoke rolling away upon the wind.

In the neighbourhood of Fort Number Four they were challenged by a Belgian sentry, and since the Marine officer had given them the countersign, they were allowed to pass. As day broke they found themselves at the Porte de Malines, and crossing the old drawbridge entered the suburb of Berchem, which is the southern part of Antwerp.

CHAPTER XII

Antwerp

By then, all three were thoroughly exhausted. Bob's wound, after the exertions he had made, was so painful that he was not able to conceal his suffering; his face was drawn and haggard. D'Avignon bitterly complained that his shoulders were so sore from such constant walking upon crutches that it hurt him to move. As for Désirée, it was apparent that the girl would take some time to recover from the extreme nervous tension of the past few days.

Fortunately, the doctor had a great friend in Antwerp whose house, as chance had it, was not far from Berchem. Accordingly, to this house they directed their steps, but found the door locked; and though they rang the bell violently and knocked several times, no one came at their summons.

Presently, however, a door opened on the other side of the street, and an old woman appeared, a concierge, whom D'Avignon remembered to have seen before.

"They are gone, monsieur," said she.

"Gone!" repeated the doctor. "They have left Antwerp?"

"Yes, monsieur. Like many others, they have fled. Since they began to drop bombs on the town, many people have gone away. It is rumoured that the Bosches are coming, that Antwerp will be taken. Do you think that is true, monsieur? We have heard stories of what has happened at Dinant and Louvain."

D'Avignon looked about him in distress.

"We are fatigued," said he. "We can go no farther."

The old woman regarded him steadfastly, peering into his face. Then she turned her eyes upon Désirée, and suddenly brought her hands together with a gesture of astonishment.

"Surely," she cried, "surely it is not Monsieur le docteur and Mademoiselle Désirée?"

D'Avignon laughed. "You have seen through our disguise," said he. "We have escaped from Brussels. We require somewhere to rest."

"From Brussels!" said the old woman. "I will open the door. Monsieur will make himself at home. How strange that I should not have known you at first! I have kept the rooms well aired, monsieur. I will look after you whilst you are in Antwerp."

Thanking her for her kindness, they entered the house, where during the next few days they established themselves in comfort. The concierge attended to their wants, cooking their meals, and

helping Désirée with the household duties. As for Bob Cunningham, he was promptly sent to bed, and treated like a patient in hospital. D'Avignon himself attended to the boy's wound, whilst Désirée played the part of a trained nurse, for which indeed she was well qualified.

For those few days, at least, they were quite happy. D'Avignon had no anxiety in regard to his mother. The old lady had left Paris for the south of France, where, he knew, she would be well looked after by friends. For the time being, father and daughter strove to forget that their home had been destroyed, that all their possessions were lost, and that they themselves were outcasts, fleeing for safety before the tide of the German advance.

For all that, they were never able to forget that they were still in the midst of war. Day and night, the big German guns thundered on the Nethe. In the stillness of autumn evenings, from the silent streets of the half-deserted city, they could hear the living shells shrieking on their way, across the valley of the eastern river.

There came news of an engagement at Wavre-St. Catherine, where the Belgian army offered a vigorous and prolonged resistance to the Germans. There was continuous fighting farther to the south; and all this was within earshot of the great city that lay within the ring of forts, waiting its fate in fortitude and silence.

Day by day the streets became more deserted,

until finally there were few civilians left in Antwerp. Motor-cars, containing Belgian or British officers, passed along the wide boulevards, travelling at the rate of forty miles an hour. There was little or no traffic to impede them; the Belgian field army lay in the trenches without, resolved to defend the only remaining stronghold of their kingdom to the last.

D'Avignon, who knew many people in Antwerp, was out for the greater part of each day. It was only through him that they heard news of what was happening in the trenches. They were glad of any news, good or indifferent. To remain in ignorance, listening, day and night, to the never-ceasing thunder of the guns that hour by hour drew nearer and nearer to the city, was greater suspense than they could bear.

One evening, the doctor returned home silent and downcast, refusing the food which Désirée and the concierge had prepared for supper. His daughter went to him, and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Father," she asked, "there is bad news?"

"There is still hope," said he.

"What has happened?" asked Bob.

It was some moments before D'Avignon answered.

"Two of the forts have gone," said he.

"Taken by assault?"

"No," said D'Avignon. "Battered to dust. Levelled to the ground by the concentrated fire of these enormous guns. I am told by those who

have come from the trenches that not one stone remains upon another."

"And does that mean," asked Désirée—"does that mean that the Germans will cross the Nethe?"

"I'm afraid so," said the other. "I doubt if the Belgians and the English are strong enough to stop them; and in any case, they have no guns capable of holding their own against the German howitzers. Even then," he went on, "I would still hope for the best, were it not for the fact that this place teems with spies. They are everywhere. Nothing of importance happens in the city that is not known an hour afterwards in the German lines."

"I hear," said Bob, "that a spy was captured this morning, in the Central Railway Station."

"Yes," said D'Avignon, "a German officer, disguised as one of the railway officials. There are thousands of people in this city who sympathize with the German cause. If Antwerp falls, it will be through treachery."

They were silent a while; and then Bob Cunningham got to his feet.

"Doctor D'Avignon," said he, "you and your daughter have been so kind to me during these days that I will never be able to thank you. I am sure you have stayed in Antwerp only to look after me. I want you both to make your escape. The road is open to Holland. I don't want you to endanger your lives on my account. It would be folly for you to stay here if the city is bombarded."

D'Avignon lit a cigar, and waved it in his hand.

"There is no hurry," said he. "They cannot shell the city until they cross the Nethe."

"But ought you not to make your preparations for flight; so that, when the time comes, you are ready?"

"No preparations are possible," said the doctor. "I have already made inquiries, and every vehicle in the town has been commandeered. There is not a motor-car, a horse, or a cart to be procured for love or money."

"That is all the more reason why you should go at once."

"And you, my friend?" said D'Avignon, with a queer smile, "what do you propose to do?"

"I think," said Bob, "I should prefer to remain here. I may be able to find some useful work to do with the British troops. I have not yet told you that when I was out to-day for my afternoon walk, I met an old friend—the man who came with us to the Château des Dragons, on the night when we were captured."

"I remember him well," said the doctor. "One who speaks a language of his own."

Bob laughed. "He is a Londoner," said he; "and there are no better fellows in the world. He told me he was sent from Paris to Dunkirk on account of his wound. There, he was taken on as a motor-bus driver, and came up to Antwerp with a British supply column. He thinks I should find

no difficulty in getting work here, until I am able to rejoin my own brigade."

"You're unfit to work," said D'Avignon. "As your medical adviser, I forbid it. It will be two months before you are able to use your left arm. What is the use of a one-armed man?" he exclaimed in indignation. "The idea is absurd! You can neither shoot nor ride a motor-bicycle."

Cunningham bit his lip, and half-turned away to hide the expression of disappointment which had come upon his face.

D'Avignon took him kindly by the shoulders.

"Be patient," said he. "This war is not going to end in a day. You will be fit to take the field in two months. Be patient, and wait—a few weeks only."

It was then that the bell rang so violently that all three looked up. They were surprised, to say the least of it, since few people knew where they were living, and this was the first caller they had had since they had been in Antwerp. It was Désirée who went to the door, and opening it, found herself face to face with her old friend and protector, Private Sharp.

"Bong swore, mamzelle. Bong swore. Vous souvenez moi?"

"Of course!" she cried, and seizing Sharp by the hand, dragged him into the room.

"Monsieur Sharp," she announced. "To whom, Father, your daughter owes her life."

CHAPTER XIII

The Calm Before the Storm

PRIVATE SHARP took off his cap and waved it to D'Avignon and Bob.

"'Ullo!" he cried. "Commong va-t-il? In other words, 'ow goes it?"

"Welcome, monsieur," said D'Avignon, rising from his chair and stretching out for his crutches. He was not yet able to walk, for the ligaments in both legs had been cut, and he had never given himself the period of rest that was necessary. "Mr. Cunningham has just told us you were in Antwerp."

"'Ere to-day, and gone to-morrow," observed Sharp. "But I reckon we won't stop in this 'ere place for another three days. I've come with bad news. You take my advice and clear off, whilst there's time. I was down at the 'ead-quarters of the Belgian Staff this afternoon, and being familiar with the French language, so to speak, picked up a certain amount o' valuable information. Mark my words, the game's up—perdued! Perdued!" he repeated, as if he liked the word.

"What has happened?" asked Désirée, looking up anxiously.

"Two more forts gone," said Private Sharp; "squashed flat as blooming pancakes. And the Germans crossing the Nethe."

"Is that true?" cried D'Avignon sharply.

"Gospel truth," said Sharp. "I 'ope, miss," said he, turning to Désirée, "that you'll excuse my pipe. I got an issue of tobacco this evening, and in these 'ere days a pipe's a friend in need."

"Would you like a cigar?" said D'Avignon.

Sharp pocketed his "friend in need" at once.

"Thank yer, sir," said he. "I think I will."

Désirée looked towards her father.

"The city will be bombarded?" she asked.

D'Avignon bowed his head.

"It is only a matter of time," said he. "On this side of the Nethe they are within range of the cathedral. They'll need a few hours in which to make the concrete platforms for their big guns, and the concrete must have time to dry. But after that, it is within their power to destroy the city piecemeal; and I am afraid they will not hesitate to do it."

There was a silence of several moments, and then Désirée spoke in a low voice, her eyes gazing out of the window towards the west, where the sun was setting over the Schelde in a great flood of gold.

"How terrible is war!" said she.

"Parfaitemong," said Private Sharp, puffing philosophically at the cigar, which seemed much to his liking.

"It seems unbelievable," Désirée went on, "that

in this age of civilization, magnificent cities should be laid waste, churches and cathedrals should be destroyed, women and children murdered, as happened when the world was barbarous."

"The German idea of war," said Bob.

"It is terrible," she repeated. "And it all seems so useless, as well as pitiful."

"Mamzelle," said Private Sharp; "beggin' your pardon, miss, wait till I get to Berlin."

Désirée smiled. "Of what use is revenge?" she asked. "You will not restore Belgium to prosperity by burning churches in Germany."

"I won't burn no churches," said Private Sharp; "an' I won't do no 'arm to women nor kids. But," he cried, bringing down his fist upon the table, "I'll knock the nose off of every bloomin' statue as I sees."

Even Désirée laughed, though a moment since she had felt little inclined for laughter.

"A well-merited revenge," exclaimed D'Avignon.

"I suppose, moosure," said Sharp in a doubtful voice, "I suppose there *are* statues in Berlin?"

"Of a certainty."

"Who of?" said Sharp.

"Of whom?" repeated D'Avignon.

Private Hercules Sharp, in his ignorance of the syntax of his own language, was not in the least offended at being corrected by a foreigner.

"Ah," said he, by way of Yes.

"Of many illustrious Germans," answered the doctor. "Frederick the Great, William the First,

Moltke, Blücher, Goethe, Schiller, Schopenhauer."

"Oh, cease!" cried Sharp. "Desist! You'll make me ill. Fancy 'avin' a name like Schopenhauer. It ain't 'olesome. It's an atrocity, that's what it is. A bloomin' atrocity."

"He was a philosopher," threw in D'Avignon.

Private Sharp immediately looked suspicious.

"Was 'e?" said he. "Well, I 'ope it done 'im good."

"You stay in Antwerp?" asked Désirée. "Where?"

"Mamzelle, I reside in a motor-bus. It's my travelling shay moi, where I sleeps an' dines, drawin' me own rations without a requisition, and no bloomin' questions asked. I've got orders to limber up this evenin' and take out a barrel o' rum and a few boxes of luxuries to the trenches east of Fort Number Five. If I git there, well and good. If I don't, I'm blowed up by a Black Maria, and there's always an identification disk to say who I was. An' my brother, what's in the North Surreys, can collar my savin's."

"You have a brother, then?"

"Not 'alf," said Private Sharp. "A fair caution. See 'ere, miss, 'ere's a letter 'e wrote me on the Aisne, when 'is battalion wasn't more'n abaht five miles from where we was." Sharp, producing an exceedingly dirty piece of paper from his pocket, proceeded to read as follows: "'Dear 'Erk.' That's short for 'Ercules," he explained. "'Dear 'Erk, If you're dead, R.I.P.; if you ain't, wot abaht that

fourpence you owes me? Trusting this finds you as it leaves me in the best of health. Your affectionate brother, Alf.'"

"He is younger than you?" asked Désirée.

"There's no knowin'," said Private Sharp. "'E says 'e is, and I say 'e ain't. And many's the time as we've fought it out. Fact is we're twins, 'im and me, same as a pair o' cartridges, and when we first 'listed we joined the same regiment. I stuck getting run in for hitting a corporal I'd never set eyes on in my life, and him drawin' my proficiency pay, when 'e was a third-class shot and me a marksman; but when it come to 'im saying it was me wot was malingering in 'orspital—I drew the line, an' went to the Fusiliers. 'E's a caution, as I've told you, miss. But I reckon there's no better fighting man this side o' the Channel, when it comes to a regular dust-up with fixed bayonets, and the company orficer shoutin' 'is lungs out. 'E's a 'oly terror, is Alf, when 'e's roused."

The most of this, to the doctor and Désirée at least, was so much Greek or double Dutch. Private Sharp, waving his cigar in his hand, ran on and on, talking excessively fast, as is often the way with those who are bred in London. In point of fact, he hailed from Camberwell, and knew the great city as it is known only to bus-drivers, hot-potato men, and policemen, from Shoreditch to the Portobello Road.

"Beggin' your pardon," said he, "I must be going. Dooty calls. The old bus with 'Seymour

'icks in England expects' wrote large as a first-class target in the front of it, and 'Wait until the bus stops' painted on the steps, is fair eating its 'ead off in the transport lines. We go out to the trenches at nightfall, mamzelle. It's safer then. The Germans usually knocks off shelling, so to speak, at six p.m., for a cup o' tea and a sossidge. Bless their little 'earts."

Sharp shook hands all round, and then, accompanied by Bob, went out into the street. It was then rapidly growing dark.

Sharp had a good deal to say to his young compatriot in private—weighty topics that a sense of chivalry had made him keep to himself in the presence of the girl, whom he had no wish to alarm.

It appeared that all had not gone well upon the Nethe. Not only had four forts in the second line of defence succumbed to the weight of the German artillery, but a Belgian division, farther east, had been driven back with some considerable loss. The bombardment of the city itself—as D'Avignon had foreseen—was not only a certainty, but imminent. Unless—as some had hope—an Allied army was advancing from the south-west, no power on earth could save the town.

It was with something of a heavy heart that Bob Cunningham wended his way back to their house. During these days a strong feeling of friendship had sprung up between the young Englishman and Monsieur D'Avignon; for friendship finds itself in times of adversity. As for what Bob thought of

Désirée—that we leave to those who tell other kinds of tales. Let it suffice for the present, that he cared much for both of them; and the thought that they would soon be in the gravest peril was by no means to his liking.

He found them seated by an opened window. It was a soft October evening. The sun itself had gone, but a wide glow of red hung like a curtain over the broad waters of the Schelde and the low-lands, stretching as far as the eye could reach towards the frontier of Holland.

"Our friend," said Désirée, "is droll. I cannot understand one half of what he says."

Bob smiled, and, taking a chair, seated himself beside them.

"He's a character," said he; "yet one that has every right to be dearly loved in England. It is mostly in time of war that people think of Thomas Atkins."

"Yet, surely, all your Thomas Atkinses are not the same as he?"

"No," said Bob, "there are a thousand types: the Highlander, with a great respect for himself, and a glorious contempt for his enemy; the Irish-man, who will crack jokes in a trench, up to his knees in mud; the Northcountryman, who grumbles because his feet are wet, whilst he holds his ground like a rock; and then, the Cockney—like Private Sharp—the finest marcher, without a doubt, and, perhaps, the finest soldier of them all. They are all Thomas Atkins, as we think of him in England;

and, at least, they have this in common: they are trained on the same system, which the Prussians pretend to despise; they have learnt all they know of warfare in the same school—on the desert, in the valleys of the North-west frontier, and on the veldt; and if I may say so, they, and their Indian comrades, are the only professional private soldiers in the world."

"And you," said Désirée, with her eyes fixed steadfastly upon the Englishman, "you are different?"

"Yes. I'm only a volunteer."

"Only?" she repeated.

"I've not been through the mill," he went on. "I'm just a chap who puts on a khaki coat because he wants to serve his country. During these last few terrible weeks—when the Germans were pouring into France—I've been brought into close touch with private soldiers. I can respect them, because I know I can never be such as they. They understand. I never will."

"Do you mean they understand—war?"

"No. They understand the little things that make them what they are—things that I can't explain; the life of the barrack-room, the canteen, the parade ground. It's a great mistake to imagine that we can create armies in a day."

"And yet," said D'Avignon, "if we are to rid France of these barbarians, we shall need every man England and France can spare."

"We will fight to the last," said Bob; "until

the military power of Germany is crushed for ever."

After that both remained silent for several minutes, sitting side by side at the open window.

There was nothing in the outlook to suggest that the great city lay in the shadow of an impending calamity. It is true the streets were deserted, and most of the houses locked up, with shutters on the windows; but this part of Antwerp, at least, presented an appearance of sleek and comfortable prosperity. A wide boulevard, fringed with trees in full leaf, extended north and south. Near at hand was a park, or garden, with flower-beds cut in odd shapes—crescents, stars, and crosses—presenting bright patches of colour; level grass lawns and winding gravel paths, where there were seats and benches.

The sky was quite cloudless, save for a few leaden streaks that marked the sunset like a grille. But most noticeable of all—most suggestive of harmony and peace—was the silence that seemed to hang upon the city like the stifling heat of an approaching thunder-storm.

After the continuous thunder of artillery that had lasted now for weeks, it was ominous—difficult to realize, even difficult to bear. The footsteps of no pedestrian, the rumbling of no vehicle in the broad streets, disturbed the stillness. It was as if Antwerp were already dead.

They strained their ears in the direction of the Nethe; where they knew the grey army lay like a

giant in hiding—a giant of devastation that trampled underfoot all that stood in its way. But the Nethe was silent too.

They would have found, no doubt, something of satisfaction in this, were it not that they knew the truth. Even then, as they sat and waited, the huge guns were advancing to within range of the Cathedral.

Désirée got up from her chair, walked from the window, and then back again, her hands clasped, her face quite white even in the red glow of the sunset.

"Father," she said, "this suspense is terrible."

"If the city falls," said the doctor, "it is God's will. The Allies will fight to the end."

There followed another pause; and then it was Bob who spoke.

"You must go!" he cried. "You must go whilst there is time."

"We remain here," said Désirée.

"No," said Bob. "I beseech you to go. It may be that they mean to defend the city; but even in that case it will be safer in the trenches than here."

To give confidence to Bob, the girl had mastered her feelings.

"Do not fear on my account," she said. "I cannot leave my father, who is crippled, and I hope I will not prove myself a coward."

She spoke as if in doubt.

The young Englishman turned away, and gazed

for some minutes out of the window, taking no heed of what he saw.

He did not like this kind of war. It had been better in the rich valleys of the Aisne. Even at Mons and Le Château, where men had been swept down in thousands, and battle was just carnage, it had been far better than this, because there were no women in the midst of peril—at least, none had come his way.

He was wondering what would happen, what the end of it all would be, when his attention was attracted by two men who came arm in arm across the park where the flower-beds were and the winding gravel paths.

Entering the street, they turned to the right, towards the house where the three refugees were gathered at the open window. One was a tall man; the other short, and very straight of back. From the moment he first set eyes upon them, Bob was vaguely conscious of having seen them somewhere before.

They were dressed in the uniform of the Antwerp Civic Guard—long blue coats with brass buttons, high-crowned peaked hats, and leather sword-belts.

These two men approached, walking in the middle of the street between the tram-lines. It was when they were immediately beneath the window that Désirée D'Avignon gave vent to a little shriek.

To call it a shriek is, perhaps, to exaggerate the fact. It may have been nothing more than an ex-

clamation of surprise. It was sufficiently loud, however, to cause the two men to look up. And in those two Civic Guardsmen of the municipality of Antwerp, Bob Cunningham recognized Lieutenant Gerhardt and Captain von Hiegler of the Prussian Guard.

Without a second thought he sprang to his feet, seizing the revolver he had placed upon the table.

"Spies!" he cried, and with that was gone from the room.

Désirée, who had made some half-hearted attempt to stop him, returned in haste to the window, whence she saw the two Germans running in the distance.

Bob, his arm still in a sling, rushed past in the street below, and almost immediately disappeared in the gathering gloom. A moment after came the sharp crack of a revolver, followed by a second and a third.

CHAPTER XIV

Gerhardt Risks his Life

DÉSIRÉE was not able to conceal the extent of her anxiety. She was filled with apprehension. Indeed, Bob Cunningham had acted more than a little rashly. It is true the Germans—disguised as they were in the uniform of the enemy—stood in the greatest danger of their lives. They had only to be arrested to be shot at sight—spies were treated with scant ceremony during these momentous days that immediately preceded the fall of Antwerp. For all that the odds were on the side of von Hiegler and his companion.

In the first place, they were two to one; and moreover, the one had been recently wounded, and was not yet in the full possession of his natural strength. Also, it was already nearly dark; the streets in that part of the town were quite deserted. It was extremely improbable that Bob would be able to summon aid.

The girl realized all this as she stood at the opened window, waiting in extreme suspense for a repetition of the shots.

All was silence—a silence that was almost unen-

durable. The footsteps of running men were no longer audible. The red glow of sunset had now vanished from the sky. Night had begun—the last night in Antwerp, for many a day, when the tricolour flag of Belgium was to fly out above the Town Hall; the most fateful night, perhaps, that this historic town had ever known throughout the centuries.

Désirée was haunted by a thousand fears. There could be little doubt that both the spies were armed. She dreaded that the Germans would lead the Englishman into a trap. She dared not think what would happen should they turn suddenly upon their pursuer in a dark street, where there would be none to hasten to the boy's assistance.

She realized her own helplessness. There was nothing she could do. Her father, also, who could not walk five yards without his crutches, was equally incapable of action. She—and he, too—could only wait.

And whilst she waited, standing there by the window, seconds seemed drawn out into minutes; minutes passed like hours. Presently she started, at the sound of a footstep in the street below.

Looking out, she caught sight of someone on the threshold of the front door. In the semi-darkness she was not able to recognize Bob Cunningham's figure; but she had little doubt that it was the young Englishman himself who had returned.

Her first thought was to go to meet him. But as she moved towards the door a feeling of faint-

ness got the better of her. Without doubt the strain of such intense excitement had been too much for her. Steadying herself by means of the back of a chair, she stood waiting, standing at her full height, her face ashen pale.

There was a heavy footstep in the passage without. And then the door opened, and there entered Lieutenant Gerhardt, of the army of the Crown Prince of Saxony, dressed in the uniform of the Antwerp Civic Guard.

He saluted, and, taking off his cap from his close-cropped head, bowed stiffly, his heels pressed together.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "you seem surprised to see me?"

It was D'Avignon who answered. The girl could not find her voice.

"What do you here?" he exclaimed.

Lieutenant Gerhardt smiled.

"I should have thought," said he, "my business was quite evident."

"A spy!" let out Désirée. The word came from her lips like a pistol-shot. Both dismay and a great contempt were mingled in her voice. She found herself in a veritable whirlpool of conflicting emotions.

"Mademoiselle," said the other, smiling still, "you are outspoken, to say the least of it. Let it suffice that I serve my country and the Emperor on the Intelligence Department of the Great General Staff."

"As my daughter says," threw in D'Avignon, "a long name for a spy, when you wear the uniform of the enemy, and pass through the Belgian lines."

"Monsieur," said Gerhardt with an air of patient calmness in which there was something unmistakably genuine, "you will, at least, grant me this: the office is not wholly devoid of danger. To carry such an enterprise to a successful issue, a little courage is somewhat necessary. You will allow that, perhaps?"

"I grant it," said the doctor. "For all that, you will be shot like a dog."

"If captured," said Gerhardt with another bow.

For the last few seconds Désirée had remained quite motionless, her lips a little parted, her eyes shifting repeatedly from the German to a certain bracket on the wall, midway between the window and the door.

Upon this bracket was a telephone, and the telephone directory, by means of which she could call up either the General Head-quarters of the Belgian Army or the Police.

Suddenly, with a swift movement, she went to the telephone, took down the receiver, and half-turned towards the spy.

"Monsieur," she said, "your life is in my hands. Surrender!"

Gerhardt was quite calm.

"Pardon," said he. "In mine."

Something, like silver, glittered in his hand,

which in the half-light they were able to distinguish as the nickel-plating on the barrel of a revolver.

"In mine," he repeated. "Mademoiselle, I give you fair warning. If you ring that bell, though I love you—I will shoot."

Désirée even laughed—a forced laugh, that lamentably failed in its purpose, if such was to intimidate the Saxon.

"I shoot first yourself," he went on; "then your father. Lastly, I kill myself."

The girl, placing the receiver on its rest, looked up, drawing a little nearer.

"Kill yourself!" she repeated. "With what object?"

"Because, mademoiselle," he answered, "in killing you, I would murder all that I hold dearest, most beautiful in life. I should have nothing left to live for."

It was some time before Désirée answered, and then it was in the slow tones of one quite mystified.

"I do not understand," said she.

"Then, mademoiselle, if you will have the patience to hear me, I will speak the truth. Since the first evening I met you, in the house among the trees on the northern bank of the Aisnelle, I have never ceased to think of you; never once has your image left my mind. Just now, when I and my companion recognized you at the window, my first thought was of the deadly peril in which I was. Following a not unnatural impulse, I took to my heels and ran. But, as I ran, I became more and

more determined to see you again, cost what it might—even life itself. I left von Hiegler, and turning up a side street, was relieved to see that I was not followed by the Englishman. Thence I came back here, with the idea of speaking to you more or less as I am speaking now, of telling you exactly what I feel."

He ceased abruptly. Both father and daughter regarded him in amazement, touched with genuine admiration. Though by then the soldiers of the Kaiser had come to be regarded as the modern representatives of the Huns of Attila, or the Vandals, or the Goths; though the "Bosches" were hated throughout northern France and Belgium with a deadly hatred—the French girl and her father could not but admit that of which their eyes and ears gave testimony: that in Lieutenant Gerhardt there was something of the finest qualities that go to the making of a man.

"Monsieur," said D'Avignon, "your words do you great credit, and me some honour, since you so admire my daughter. You have every right to the consideration that is due to a gallant soldier and a gentleman. Concerning the matter of which you speak, my daughter is free to answer for herself."

Gerhardt bowed and turned straight to the girl.

"I cannot expect," said he, "that you should understand me."

"I think I do," she took him up. "I have no wish to hurt your feelings. Still, you must admit that the present time is not very suitable for love-

making. Our nations, monsieur, are at war. Moreover, it is war to the death. In spite of that, I can admire you for your courage and your candour. You have acted honourably throughout. I have not forgotten the service you rendered me before, or that you spoke once on behalf of my father. For that I am truly grateful; but you must never think that you have earned anything more than my gratitude. You must not even hope that my feelings towards you can ever be any different than they are to-day."

Lieutenant Gerhardt was a Teuton, moreover, of the Saxon variety. And if the Saxon is less arrogant than the Prussian, he is no less tenacious. These men come of a stubborn race. They are not easy to convince against their will; neither have they much capacity for seeing things from any other standpoint than their own.

Though Gerhardt stood in peril of his life, though he was more or less at the mercy of those upon whose privacy he had encroached, he remained in the presence of Désirée and her father for several hours, and though they commanded and implored, he flatly refused to go. He seemed to value his own personal safety as nothing. He was swayed by both jealousy and love, and was in consequence almost desperate. With all the reckless ardour of his race, in the presence of her father he asked Désirée to become his wife. Again and again, the girl was obliged to tell him that it was sheer madness for him to hope.

And all this time, her thoughts were with the Englishman. Even as she answered Gerhardt's questions, speaking her mind openly, in a calm voice with neither haste nor indecision, she dreaded that some calamity had happened, since Bob Cunningham had not returned.

It was already past ten o'clock at night. Cunningham had been absent some hours. She had ascertained from Gerhardt that there had been no damage done when shots were exchanged in the street; but she could not think what kept the young Englishman so long. If he had lost all trace of von Hiegler, he would have returned before now. If it had come to a duel—a fight for life between two men, the one already wounded, the other a spy whose situation was already desperate—the chances were that it had gone ill with the Englishman.

It was now quite dark, save for the moonlight, across which sped in quick succession a host of small ragged clouds, ominously black.

The inordinate stillness, which had so jarred upon their nerves, was even more noticeable than before.

"I am to take your words as final?" asked the Saxon, still stiff as a ramrod.

"Absolutely," said Désirée. "And once again, I must request you to go. You have no right to trade upon my sympathies. I cannot forget the reason why you are here, in Antwerp."

"I obey my orders," said the other.

"You are a spy," she answered, "and liable to be shot at sight."

"Mademoiselle," said he, "betray me."

Once again she went to the telephone.

"I give you five minutes," she said. "Whether or not you are gone by then, I ring up the Civic Guard."

"And why not now?" he asked with a sad smile.

"Because," she answered, "I cannot forget that you came here of your own free will. I therefore give you a fair chance to make good your escape. Go, whilst there is time."

The Lieutenant picked up his revolver, and played with it in both hands.

"It is my duty to shoot," said he.

"And mine," she replied, "to give you up at once."

D'Avignon, who, seated in a chair, had remained throughout an interested listener, now laughed aloud.

"And you will both fail in your duty," said he. "You, monsieur, are incapable of committing such a crime as murder. My daughter—I know her well enough—is only too willing to give you a fair chance to escape; and I myself am of her way of thinking. In coming here you trusted to our generosity. But there is an end to patience. Go, as Désirée has said; in five minutes we warn the authorities that two Germans, dressed in the uniform of the Civic Guard, are abroad in Antwerp."

Gerhardt shrugged his shoulders, and then thrust his revolver back into its holster. And then, with-

out a word, with one punctilious bow to the two of them, he took himself from the room.

Désirée remained standing at the telephone, with the receiver in one hand and the handle of the bell in the other. There was then a candle burning in the room, which had been lighted earlier in the evening. By the flickering, uncertain light of this Désirée was able to see the hands of an old Dutch clock that ticked upon the mantelshelf.

At the conclusion of five minutes, on the stroke, she rang up violently, like one in the greatest haste, her face, on a sudden, all flushed with colour.

A little later, from the offices of the Commandant of the Civic Guard in the central part of the city, there came forth into the wide Boulevard de Keyser five armed men, under an officer of gendarmes, who sprang into a motor-car, and started off at the rate of about forty miles an hour towards the suburbs to the south.

CHAPTER XV

A House of Spies

ALL this time, whilst Lieutenant Gerhardt, with Saxon eloquence and ardour, was holding forth upon the one and only subject that was nearest to his heart, Bob Cunningham was experiencing something in the nature of an adventure.

As he issued from the house, one arm in a sling, a loaded revolver in the other hand, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the two shadowy figures of the German spies, even then turning up a side street. In that direction he hastened as fast as his legs could carry him.

In ordinary circumstances he would have overtaken von Hiegler—who, as will be remembered, was stout—without the least difficulty in the world. It is, however, no easy matter to run with one arm in a sling, bandaged to a wooden splint; and moreover, the Germans fled for their lives.

On a sudden von Hiegler turned sharply, and, resting the barrel of his revolver upon the wrist of his left hand, fired two shots in quick succession. Bob heard the bullets whistle past his head, but continued to hasten forward, firing back as he ran.

The Prussian was in no mood to wait. He knew not for certain how many there were in pursuit, and well recognized that there was danger in the firing, which at any moment might attract others to the street to take up the chase. With quick hands he thrust his revolver in its holster and took to his heels, running until his face was purple, like that of a man on the verge of a fit, the perspiration standing out in beads upon his forehead.

Gerhardt was then far ahead. As we know, he turned back and retraced his steps by another street, coming upon Désirée and her father by surprise.

As for von Hiegler, he bore straight ahead; but, strive as he might, he could not shake off the Englishman, who clung to him like a hound in view of a running fox.

As Bob ran he looked about him, taking in his surroundings. Von Hiegler had led him into the south-western suburb of Berchem—a quiet, respectable neighbourhood at the best of times, now silent, gloomy, and deserted.

Save for an occasional stray dog, the narrow streets were empty. No one was abroad. The doors of the houses were locked, the windows closed and shuttered. To all appearances the two men—the fugitive and his pursuer—had this part of the city to themselves.

Bob, now realizing that it was improbable that he would get any assistance, began to ask himself

what he should do if the Prussian were overtaken, or took it into his head to turn and fight.

Von Hiegler was a strong man, broad of shoulder, and over six feet in height, and, though inclined to stoutness, in the full possession of his strength.

On the other hand, the young Englishman was already conscious of a feeling of faintness, and knew well enough that if it came to a struggle, he would soon be overpowered by the Prussian.

There is little doubt that, under certain conditions, discretion is the better part of valour; and, though he had in the first instance acted in a foolhardy and reckless manner, Bob now decided to be cautious. Without losing sight of the fugitive, he fell behind, resolved to keep his distance.

Presently they came into a wider street, a kind of boulevard, with large trees on the skirting of the pavement. This street was almost as dark as the other, since it contained but a few street lamps, some distance apart. None the less, by the light of the moon, Cunningham was able to discern, at a distance of about two hundred yards, a large motor-car standing before the door of a house that lay back some twenty paces from the alignment of a row of villas. He was now careful to advance well screened by the shadow of the trees.

Von Hiegler, in the flickering light of a street lamp, was seen to thrust a hand in his trousers pocket. Looking back, and seeing no one in pursuit, he slackened down to a walk. Bob, guessing

what was about to happen, remained well in the shade.

The spy stopped dead. For some seconds he stayed quite motionless, straining his eyes in the darkness to see if he was observed. Then, after casting a quick glance at the car, he opened a small iron gate, and approached the door of the house before which the motor-car was standing.

Bob saw his chance and took it. As quick as lightning he passed up the street, crouching like a cat, and advancing as silently as possible.

He soon came to a narrow archway, a dark place, no doubt the entrance to a garage or mews. There he was almost immediately opposite the motor-car and the house which even then von Hiegler entered, after some fumbling with a latch-key.

The door closed noiselessly, and a little after a bright red light appeared in a lower window—red because of the blind, which was scarlet, and which did not quite reach the window-sill. Beneath this blind was a narrow strip of yellow lamplight that threw a beam upon the roadway.

Swiftly, on tiptoe, Cunningham crossed the roadway, passed through the open gate, and advanced upon a narrow brick path dividing two small patches of grass, unworthy of the name of lawns. Going to the lighted window, he looked in under the blind.

Accustomed as his eyes were to the darkness, he was not at first able to see; but presently he made out a table—littered with papers—a few chairs, and

a small piano. And there, in the middle of the room, was von Hiegler, in the uniform of the Antwerp Civic Guard.

The German was moving to and fro in a restless manner, sometimes remaining quite still, but never for longer than a few seconds at a time—standing erect, with head turned sideways, as if to listen. Without doubt, the man was nervous—as, indeed, he had some cause to be.

Suddenly he moved towards the door. Bob, having little doubt that the Prussian was about to return to the street, looked rapidly about him for some place where he could hide.

In the moonlight he made out a small pit—no doubt a kind of ash-bin—surrounded, like a well, by a low brick wall, no more than three feet in height. Without another thought he sprang into this, and found himself ankle-deep in dust and cinders, potato peelings, waste-paper, and empty tins.

However, at such a moment one has no right to be squeamish. Bob's heart was thumping against his ribs.

Von Hiegler came out upon the door-step.

At first he was cautious, looking furtively both up and down the street. Seeing nothing of his pursuer, and thinking, no doubt, that he had managed to give Bob the slip, he approached the small iron gate; and there, taking a whistle from his pocket, he blew a shrill, continuous note, like that which is given by a policeman.

After that he waited, impatiently tapping a foot upon the ground.

All this time Bob was tempted to fire, to kill the spy like a dog. Two things caused him to desist. Firstly, it would be very like a murder; secondly, he had a mind to find out what the German meant to do. Von Hiegler was not ten paces distant from the ash-bin; and if he looked over the low brick wall Cunningham was lost.

Presently the Prussian spoke aloud in his own language.

"Where is he?" said he. "*Himmel!* Time flies. He cannot have been captured!"

He little guessed where his impetuous Lieutenant was; he never suspected for a moment that even then Gerhardt, forgetful of his duty and the dangerous mission upon which he was engaged, was blurting forth the truth to Désirée D'Avignon in the presence of her father.

Von Hiegler was a brave man. And when we have given a Prussian credit for courage, there is, as a rule, not much more to be said. If he believed that Gerhardt had fallen into the hands of the enemy, his own life was in the greater danger. Presently a veritable hornet's nest would come buzzing about his ears.

For all that, despite some small suggestion of nervousness in the way he started at the slightest sound, the man was self-possessed. He kept his wits about him.

"I can wait," said he, just loud enough for the

boy to hear. "I will give him till ten o'clock."

At that he went back into the house, and softly closed the door.

Cunningham, creeping out of his hiding-place, returned to the window, where he looked in.

Von Hiegler was occupied at the table, sorting papers and folding several large sheets that looked like maps. Certain papers he put carefully into a leather suit-case that lay open on a chair; others he tore up and threw into a bright fire that was burning in the grate.

On a sudden he rose to his feet, and went to the door so quickly that Bob had only just time to beat a hasty retreat to his old hiding-place—the ash-bin.

The Prussian appeared in the doorway. He still carried his revolver, and the moonlight glittered on the nickel-plated butt, upon which his fingers played with a certain nervous energy.

Walking to the iron gate, he looked both up and down the road. No sign of Gerhardt was to be seen. All the houses in the neighbourhood were in complete darkness. The street was quite deserted. The silence that hung upon the doomed city was ghost-like, and seemed the greater because of the incessant cannonade which had lasted for weeks, and had ceased so suddenly that very morning.

Von Hiegler muttered a thick, guttural oath, and snapped a finger and thumb. For a while he seemed undecided what to do.

There was no doubt he intended to leave Antwerp

that night, but was loath to do so without his companion. As Bob was soon to discover, it was no love of Gerhardt that caused the Prussian to risk his life by remaining in the city after he had been recognized and pursued. The fact was, the Lieutenant had upon his person certain documents —sold to him by a treacherous rascal who took German gold with one hand and Belgian silver with the other; the kind of ne'er-do-well that never fails to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a great war, who comes into sudden notoriety as the dregs of the ocean are washed ashore in a storm.

From this man Gerhardt had obtained the secret orders issued from the Allied Head-quarters that very night. Those orders von Hiegler himself had never seen; and, beyond the fact that certain dispositions were to be made in the event of the Belgian and British forces evacuating the city, the Prussian had nothing definite to carry to the ear of his employer.

For this reason he was determined to find Gerhardt if possible. He had no wish to be severely reprimanded on his return to the German lines. If he escaped from Antwerp alone, and Gerhardt had not been captured, the evidence would be black against him that he had left his Lieutenant in the lurch.

He whistled again, louder than before; and when he received no answer, set off walking down the street.

Presently he stopped, quite suddenly, as a man will who remembers something. Coming back to the front door he closed it, and drawing a key from his pocket locked the door, and then returned to the gate. And then, walking quickly, he set off in the darkness, and was soon lost to view.

Bob, stealthily climbing over the low brick wall, moved to the door. It was securely locked, and refused to open. The light still burned in the window where was the red blind, which did not quite reach the window-sill.

The boy thought for a moment. It was a risky thing that he was about to do, and he knew it. Still, the risk was worth the prize.

From under the red blind he could see von Hiegler's papers spread out upon the table in the lamplight. Moving on tiptoe, he passed round to the back of the house.

The back door was not only locked, but bolted from the inside. There was no means of entrance there. The windows were also bolted, and the blinds down. That side of the house was in total darkness.

Bob looked about him. As far as he could make out, he was in a small yard enclosed within high brick walls—too high to be vaulted or scaled.

It was clear that, if it was no easy matter to enter the house, it would be even more difficult to effect his escape, should it be his misfortune to be discovered.

Examining the house in the moonlight, he saw

at once there was but one possible means of entrance. On the top of a small outhouse—no doubt a back kitchen or a scullery—there was a kind of skylight which was open.

A convenient rain-barrel and a leaden gutter enabled the boy to scramble upon the roof, in spite of his wounded arm. There, crawling on his knees, he reached the skylight, which he opened to its full extent. Peering down into the darkness, he could just discern the floor, which appeared to be of stone.

He hesitated a moment, and it was then that he heard once again von Hiegler's whistle. The Prussian was some streets away, still looking for his lieutenant.

Bob, holding to the woodwork around the skylight with his only available hand, lowered himself to arm's length, and then dropped to the ground.

Striking a match, he looked about him. As he had guessed would be the case, he found himself in a scullery. A door in front of him was open, and passing through this, he entered a roomy kitchen where everything was in extreme disorder. Plates, cutlery, cooking utensils, and glasses—some dirty, some clean—had been piled haphazard upon the dresser and the table. The fire had gone out. A coal-box had been upset upon the floor, and some small pieces of coal were crushed under foot as Bob crossed the room.

Striking matches as he went, he experienced no difficulty in finding his way to the front passage,

and thence into the sitting-room where burned the lamp, and where the Prussian's maps and papers were spread out upon the table.

Bob pounced upon these in almost savage anticipation. He felt that he was face to face with great events—or rather, one of those moments had arrived on which depend tremendous issues. Von Hiegler, he knew, was a spy, and there, in the lamplight on the table, was the evidence in black and white of all his perfidy.

The boy's hands trembled with excitement as he fingered the documents. There were large-scale maps, not only of the Antwerp forts, but of the lines of trenches that linked one to the other. There were papers setting forth in detail the strength and dispositions of the various units that comprised the garrison. There was a plan of the city upon which all the most vulnerable points—such as supply depots, headquarter offices, ordnance stores, and magazines—were marked in red, the whole map being divided into small squares; and it is by means of such squares that the fire of modern siege artillery is directed. There were copies of Army orders, issued by the Belgian Headquarters during the preceding three weeks, and lists of citizens who were known to sympathize with the German cause.

When he had examined both the papers upon the table and those in the opened suit-case, Cunningham could only gasp. He had, indeed, found his way into a veritable House of Spies.

It took him some few seconds to recover his presence of mind, to think what was left to do. He knew nothing then of the most valuable document of all, which Lieutenant Gerhardt carried on his person, in the inner pocket of his tunic. None the less, it was apparent that these papers must never reach the German lines, where they would meet the eyes of the members of the Great General Staff.

With quick hands Bob gathered them together, folded them anyhow, and stuffed them into his pockets. And no sooner had he done that than, to his extreme consternation, he heard a step upon the threshold of the front door, and almost immediately a key turned in the lock.

CHAPTER XVI

The Iron Cross

THERE never was a man yet born who did not on an occasion lose his head. At this moment, it must be confessed that Cunningham, on the spur of impulse, was guilty of an extremely foolish action.

Seeing that his life was in the greatest danger, it was above all things necessary for him to hide without delay, and it did not occur to him that the papers would be missed. Someone was already fumbling with the lock of the front door. There was not a moment to lose. Passing swiftly on tiptoe to the kitchen, he crouched in a darkened corner.

He heard a heavy step in the hall, and someone coughed. There was something in the sound of that cough, in its thick huskiness, that made Bob feel quite sure that it was von Hiegler himself who had returned.

He listened, and thought he could distinguish the footsteps of only one man. A moment after, a door closed—no doubt that which led into the sitting-room.

It was then, for the first time, that the boy remembered that the spy's papers were in his pocket. At the thought his heart beat like a sledge-hammer. He had seen enough of them to know the value of the documents that had fallen into his hands, more or less by chance. In the ordinary course of events he would have been prepared to stay and fight it out. It was now plainly his duty to escape—if that were possible. If he risked his life unnecessarily, and lost it, the Prussian would regain possession of those secrets for which the German General Staff was prepared to pay so highly.

And yet, to escape was no easy matter. It will be remembered that he had dropped down into the scullery through the opened skylight; however, since he had neither steps nor ladder, he could not return that way. It was true the back door was bolted on the inside; but then, it was also locked, and the key had been taken away.

He looked about him like a hunted man. He felt like a criminal on whose track are the officers of the law, who sees before him visions of the gallows.

For all that he was now master of his senses. He recognized that, in moments of emergency, it is advisable to act. Since escape was impossible, he and the Prussian must meet; and in such case it would be to his advantage to take von Hiegler by surprise. Advancing with the greatest caution, a finger on the trigger of his revolver, he glided into the hall.

On a sudden he heard von Hiegler's voice uplifted in a savage oath. He paused a moment, and then passed noiselessly on.

"Hands up!" he cried.

Captain von Hiegler could not have looked more astonished had he found himself confronted by his Emperor.

"You!" he uttered, and made a motion of his hand towards his holster.

"Hands up!" repeated Bob.

The muzzle of the boy's revolver was not six inches from the Prussian's eyes.

Von Hiegler had to obey. Nothing else was left him. The expression upon his face was one of intense alarm. As his hands went up above his head, in a strange, jerky action which reminded Bob of the workings of a cheap wooden toy, his voice came in husky, breathless tones.

"How did you come here?" he asked.

"That is my affair," said Bob, "not yours."

"It is you, then," said the other, "who has stolen my—correspondence."

Cunningham could not restrain a smile.

"Your correspondence," said he, "is of a peculiar nature. You correspond in maps, plans, and Army orders."

"It is war," said von Hiegler, looking about him with a sheepish look.

Bob went quite close to the man, and without warning, and without shifting his aim the fraction of an inch, snatched the loaded revolver from the

holster at von Hiegler's waist, and threw it upon the table.

"It is well," said he, "to draw the fangs of a snake."

"I am at your mercy," said the other, "and you know it."

"Not so long ago," said Bob, "my life was in your hands. Now the tables are turned. You will be so good as to keep your hands above your head, and to walk quietly in front of me. I will tell you when to turn to the right or to the left. Endeavour to escape, break into a run, and I shoot. At a range of about six feet I can hardly miss."

At these words the man's expression changed as by a miracle. Death is, perhaps, easy enough to face when it comes in the midst of a storm of shot and shell, to the accompaniment of savage cheers and all the unholy circumstance of war. But the fate of a spy is cold and terrible. To be shot like a dog—blindfolded, in the gloaming by an open graveside, helpless and utterly without hope—that is enough, indeed, to cause the stoutest heart to quail.

It was clear that von Hiegler had little liking for the picture. As a rule, his was a complexion highly coloured, like that of one who eats and drinks too much. This colour faded from his cheeks as swiftly as the passing of a cloud, and he stood before the boy, ashen-grey, with dark, sunken eyes and thick lips that trembled.

For a moment he appeared quite woebegone; an

old man—old before his time. He resembled one stricken by some incurable disease, who knows the nature of his illness, and yet is not reconciled to his fate. His great chest had fallen in, his shoulders were hunched and stooping.

And then, with a great effort, he gave proof of the manhood that lay deep within his nature. He pulled himself together, just as a dog will shake itself when newly come from the water. He squared his shoulders, threw out his chest, and even threw back his head.

"As you will," said he. "The fortune of war."

Bob, though he had no cause to love von Hiegler, had small liking for the business.

"No one more than yourself," said he, "has better merited such a fate."

"How so?"

"Have you forgotten the armoured car?"

Von Hiegler made a gesture of impatience.

"Lead on," he said. "You waste time in words, and do no more than prolong this terrible suspense."

It is a manly thing to pity. The man who is without pity is a coward. To be large-hearted, honourable, and brave; here is a trinity of virtues that we all have to strive for, and without which we must somehow fail in manhood.

It is often necessary to shoot a horse or dog; and whatever our task, we must somehow brace ourselves to do it. But to do such things without compunction is little to our credit; to take delight in the doing, stamps the criminal. Inhumanity—

by its very meaning—places man among the tigers.

Von Hiegler, a spy, caught red-handed at his work, was to be shot like a dog, or horse—a painful duty which, in the interests of this state or of that republic, in accordance with the rules and customs of war, it is necessary for someone to perform.

It was not Bob's duty to kill him; but it was his duty to lead him before his judges—a sure step in the direction of the place of execution. As the boy had said, von Hiegler had well merited the bullets of a firing party; he had played the spy too long, not only in the uniform of his enemies, but under the Red Cross of Geneva. And yet he was sorry for the man, in much the same way as he would have been sorry for a poor, foundered horse. It seemed a grave responsibility to put a human being out of the world as one might crush a cockroach or a fly. For all that, he had no thought of hesitation.

"One moment," said the Prussian. "You will give me permission to get something from the cupboard?"

"No," said the other. "I am afraid I cannot do that. You will remain with your hands above your head."

"You do not trust me?"

"I am not quite a fool."

"It is something," said the Prussian, "something I value—highly."

"Then," said Bob, "I will contrive to get it for you. Tell me where it is."

He went to the cupboard indicated, which was between the fireplace and the door. Even whilst he moved, he was careful to keep his revolver directed at the man's chest. As we know, one arm was in a sling; and being mindful of the fable of the fox and the cheese, he would not set down his weapon in order to free his only available hand. Keeping his eyes upon his prisoner, whom he warned not to shift his ground, and following von Hiegler's directions, he now groped with the barrel of the revolver upon the second shelf.

"More to the left," said the Prussian. "A little more. There! There, you have it."

The muzzle of the revolver had struck something hard, which Bob swept from the shelf. And a small black thing bounded across the room and hit the fender.

The Prussian asked leave to pick it up; and having gained permission, held up before the lamplight the Iron Cross which Bob had first seen on the man's grey tunic that afternoon when he had found him standing under the trees. With great care, and even pride, Captain von Hiegler placed the cordon around his neck, so that the cross was suspended beneath his collar. And strange, indeed, it looked upon the uniform of the Antwerp Civic Guard.

"Now," said he, "I am ready."

Cunningham moved towards the door.

"You do not mean to defend yourself?" said he.

Von Hiegler shook his head.

Since he was going out into the streets, it was well for him that it was night, and that that part of Antwerp was deserted; else, had the Belgian crowd seen the Iron Cross of the German Empire upon the uniform of the Civic Guard, the spy had been roughly handled, and it would have taken a score of gendarmes to save his life.

As the Prussian admitted, he meant to make no defence. Since there was little, indeed, that he could find to say on his own behalf, since he recognized that he was already a doomed man, he, no doubt, preferred to put a bold face on the matter, and meet his fate with calmness and resignation.

In this there was a certain brutal courage that Bob could not but admire. Von Hiegler, for all his sins, could rise to the heroic in the hour of his distress. He could not forget that he was a soldier —one of the almost illimitable brotherhood that constitutes the greatest army that the world has ever seen, and which—it is devoutly to be hoped—the world will ever see.

Bob looked at him from head to foot.

"We have already wasted much time," said he. "I must ask you to walk in front."

Von Hiegler took a step forward, and then stopped dead, gazing over the young Englishman's shoulder with the countenance of one who sees a ghost. So amazed did he appear that it was all the boy could do to refrain from turning round.



AS HE FIRED, SOMEONE FROM BEHIND STRUCK HIS ARM UPWARD

"What is it?" he exclaimed.

The Prussian smiled. And then, on a sudden, his right arm, which had been held above his head, shot out, and his hand grasped the revolver which Bob had thrown upon the table.

Bob Cunningham fired. The report in the confined space of that small room was like a cannon shot. The room was filled with smoke and the smell of black powder, which is more pungent than cordite, though less sickening.

Bob had aimed with care. The fraction of a second before his finger pressed the trigger, the barrel, he knew, was directed fair at the Prussian's heart. But, as he fired, someone from behind struck his arm upward, so that the bullet pierced the ceiling, and brought down a little shower of plaster that lay upon the table around the lamp.

Before the boy could fire again, before he had time even to realize what had happened, he was seized and held as in a vice.

He struggled; but his efforts were of small avail. He was still weak from his wound, and with one arm in splints and bandages, he could not hold his own against one who was in the full possession of his strength.

Besides, in a moment, von Hiegler's weight was added to that of the man who had taken Bob from behind; and presently, the boy, in greater pain than we can well describe, lay full length upon the floor.

The Prussian laughed aloud.

"The fortune of war!" said he.

Bob never answered. He thought of the papers which even then were in the pocket of his coat; and there was something in the thought that was bitterer than gall.

He managed to turn a little, though the weight of the two men was on his chest; and lifting his eyes, he looked into the face of Gerhardt. As he sank back again with something that was like a groan, a motor-car flew past in the street without. It was the car that contained the members of the Civic Guard whom Désirée had summoned.

CHAPTER XVII

The First Shell

If the truth be told, Lieutenant Gerhardt was in no mood to be trifled with. He had just left Désirée D'Avignon and her father, and as he hastened on his way through the narrow streets of Berchem, his thoughts were as dark as the night.

He remembered the girl's words, which seemed to ring in his ears. He had been told he was to put all thoughts of her from his mind, which was no such easy matter. He knew—or, at least, he had a shrewd suspicion—that in Bob Cunningham, the young English soldier, he had a rival not to be despised.

He cursed the boy as he hastened forward, believing in his heart that, had it not been for Bob, the French girl might have thought quite differently of the claims of a well-born lieutenant of the line, serving not without distinction in the invincible armies of the Kaiser.

Wounded vanity is, indeed, a kind of spur that makes of all men fools that ride headlong to destruction. Gerhardt had forgotten all about the papers he carried in the pocket of his coat; he

had forgotten von Hiegler, and even the extreme danger in which he himself was, a spy in the very citadel of the foe. He had no other thought than revenge, a desire to meet his rival face to face, as he had done more than once in his university days at Bonn, when brother students had slashed each other with broadswords for no better purpose than that their scars might be proclaimed to all the world.

As in a dream, he had wended his way back to the house where he and von Hiegler had established themselves, since the fateful evening when they had crawled through the Belgian lines like a pair of thieves in the night. He had paid no heed to the way he was going; and yet, sooner than he thought, he found himself at his destination.

To his surprise the door was open. It was not like his captain to be careless, when so much depended upon caution. And then, to his amazement, as he stood irresolute in the passage, he heard voices in the sitting-room.

Noiselessly opening the door, and peering in, he was confronted by the truth, which was at first bewildering. For there was von Hiegler, with both hands held above his head; and with his back to Gerhardt stood Bob Cunningham, the master of that amazing situation, the very man whom the Saxon blamed for the destruction of all his hopes.

Von Hiegler, seeing his comrade, and recogniz-

ing that deliverance was at hand, had snatched at his revolver. Bob had fired; and Gerhardt had struck the weapon upward, so that the plaster fell from the ceiling. And now, the fortune of war had shifted, like a swaying bough in a fickle wind; and it was Bob who was at the mercy of his former captive.

"In the nick of time," said the Prussian, speaking, for the boy's benefit, in English. "Another minute, Gerhardt, and you would have found me on my way to a drum-head court martial, a few savage questions—thrown at me, like bits of meat to a dog—and then, the firing party and a bandage for my face."

Assisted by Gerhardt, Bob got to his feet. The Lieutenant laid a hand upon the boy's shoulder, and looked him fair in the face.

"You're as slippery as an eel," said he. "But this time you shall not escape."

At that, he moved the lamp from the table, and taking the table-cloth in his two hands tore it into strips. Of these long strips he now made good use, binding Bob's feet so tightly together that, in order to move, the boy was obliged to hop in so ludicrous a manner that Captain von Hiegler, casting prudence to the wind, laughed so loudly and heartily that large tear-drops trickled down his cheeks and fell upon the Iron Cross that jangled against the buttons of his tunic.

Gerhardt turned to his captain.

"Are we to kill him?" he demanded.

Von Hiegler, ceasing to laugh, blew out his cheeks, and looked at Bob.

"Kill him!" he repeated. "Why, no. A week or so ago, I would have shot him without a second thought, on the principle that one English swine-dog is much the same as another. Now, I think differently. This young man has his points. He is a soldier, and, so far as I am aware, has done no more than serve his vile, fog-begotten, and benighted country."

Gerhardt was silent for a while.

"I'm glad," said he, at length.

"Glad, my friend, of what?"

"Glad, sir, that you mean to spare his life. I, too, have no liking for what would be near to murder."

"Ha," cried von Hiegler, "I should kill him out of hand, were it necessary to do so. As it is, we have merely to leave him gagged and bound. No one will find him, and by to-morrow morning we shall be safe in the German lines."

"The car is ready?" asked the other.

The Prussian pointed towards the street.

"It is at the door," said he. "You have the countersign?"

Gerhardt smiled, and nodded, and then drew from his pocket a single piece of paper.

"Here are the secret orders for to-night," said he.

Von Hiegler crossed the room. His tread was so heavy that he shook the house.

"Well done!" he cried. "Tell me, what do they intend to do?"

Gerhardt paused a moment, as if to give dramatic effect to what he was about to say.

"Evacuate," he answered.

"Evacuate! Deliver over the city!"

"Yes. Preparations have already been made for a grand retreat of the whole Belgian army along the Dutch frontier to Ostende and Dunkirk. If we can get this news to the German camp by daybreak to-morrow morning, a flank movement can be made to cut them off by way of Ghent and the canal, and nothing but a few stragglers will ever reach the dunes."

Von Hiegler could not contain his delight. His countenance was once again purple and inflated. He clapped Gerhardt on the back so violently and suddenly that it was all the Lieutenant could do to keep his balance.

"And the countersign?" he cried.

"Louvain!"

"Louvain," repeated the Prussian. "That, and our Belgian uniforms, are good enough to take us through Vieux Dieu, almost to the trenches. Thence we must slip past as best we can. It will not be difficult; the examining posts will doubtless let us pass. Your French is good enough. I will not attempt to speak. I fear I speak the French of Potsdam, rather than of Paris."

In the meantime, whilst Captain von Hiegler was talking in his loud, boisterous voice, Gerhardt

approached Bob, from whose pockets, one after the other, he took the captured papers. Without troubling to look through them, he bundled them into the suit-case, which he himself took out to the motor-car. When he returned, von Hiegler was folding across his knee a large table-napkin which he had taken from the cupboard.

This was placed across Bob's mouth, a knot being tied so tightly at the back of his head that the boy found it difficult to breathe.

"He has one arm free," said Gerhardt. "We must bind him to a leg of the table. It is very necessary for our safety that he remains here for twelve hours at least."

"Rope," said the Prussian. "Have you any rope? Ah, the curtain cords will do!"

Gerhardt took down the two curtain cords that depended on either side of the window. These he tied together by means of a reef-knot. He had but just completed the work when, on a sudden, he straightened, and remained standing perfectly erect and still.

Von Hiegler, too, who had been seated on a chair, rose hurriedly to his feet.

"Hist!" said he. "Listen!"

It was a moment before Gerhardt answered. And it was during that brief pause that the eternal silence of the doomed city was broken as by a spell.

From somewhere far distant, towards the south-east, there came the heavy thudding sound of a monster cannon—a great hollow "boom" that

rolled slowly in far-reaching echoes across the lowlands of the Schelde.

And then some invisible and shrieking fury, changing by its clamorous complaint a night of peace into a night of terror, tore overhead—like an evil spirit loosed from the nether regions.

Quite near at hand there was a terrific explosion, followed by a long continuous roar of falling masonry and brickwork.

"Quick!" cried Gerhardt. "Our guns have got to work."

As he moved across the room another report smote the sky like a thunder-clap, and a second shell came hurtling on its way, nearer than the other.

Bob saw Gerhardt standing in the doorway. Von Hiegler was looking about him quickly, like a man who is somewhat flurried. And then it was as if the earth opened to its depths.

There was a deafening crash—a peal of thunder in the confined space of a few cubic feet. The boy was blinded by a great flash of light. In the space of the fraction of a second he saw the ceiling burst, the walls rock like living things, and Gerhardt carry both his hands to his face.

Then all was at end—still and inky black.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Bombardment

How long it was before Bob Cunningham recovered consciousness he was never afterwards able to say. When he came to himself, the first thing that he was aware of was an insufferable weight upon his chest; it was as if he was pinned to the ground by a hundredweight of lead. The pain he suffered was considerable, and became more acute as he struggled to free himself. At last he was able to assume a sitting position, resting upon his unwounded arm.

All about him was quite dark—at least, it seemed so to him. Gradually he recovered his memory; he was able to recollect more or less what had happened.

It will be remembered that, at the moment when the shell struck the house, Bob's only available arm had not been bound. With this hand he was able to free his legs and to remove the bandage from his mouth.

Then, with an effort he struggled to his feet. As he did so a shower of plaster fell from his clothes.

Looking about him, he found to his amazement that he was now able to see.

The thing that surprised him most was that he should find himself in the open air. This seemed strange, because he distinctly remembered that, before he lost consciousness, he had been with the two Germans in a small sitting-room, where an oil-lamp had been burning on the table. However, there was no question as to the fact that he was now out of doors. He could see a pale moon swiftly threading its way, like a needle, through an interminable series of thin, fleecy clouds.

A shell flew overhead, and burst quite near at hand with a report that shook the earth. Bob, turning his eyes in the direction of the explosion, saw a house of many gables and tall, old-fashioned chimneys burst into flame. At first there was a red glow, that grew rapidly brighter and more steady. And then the red turned to golden, and small tongues of fire shot forth, which presently united in one great sheet of fire.

And all this time the whole night was a pandemonium of noise and terror. Far away in the distance the great siege guns, which had wrought such havoc upon the fortresses upon the Meuse, spoke with the tongues of giants. The very worst —all that Dr. D'Avignon had foreseen—had come to pass: Antwerp was at the mercy of the invader.

Bob Cunningham realized, quite suddenly, that this was no time to remain inactive. It was his duty to be up and doing. He took a few steps

forward, and as he did so, tripped over a heavy beam that lay immediately across his path. Stumbling, he just saved himself from falling by clutching at the ruins of a wall.

And then the moon came out from behind a cloud-bank, and he found himself looking downward, staring at the figure of a man.

This man lay quite still and silent, face downward among the ruins. For all that, Bob recognized him at once as Lieutenant Gerhardt, of the army of the Crown Prince of Saxony.

Kneeling, he felt the man's heart, and was relieved to find that it was still beating. Almost immediately Gerhardt opened his eyes, and looked hard at Bob in the vacant manner of one just awakened from sleep.

"Where am I?" he asked in German; and then, after a pause, recognizing his companion, he ran on in broken English. "Ah, yes," said he, "I remember now. I found you with Hiegler in the house; you were our prisoner; and then a shell came, and after that—this!"

He had struggled to his feet, and, as he said the last word, made an emphatic, sweeping motion of a hand across the colossal rubbish-heap that had once been a building. Indeed, not a wall remained standing higher than ten feet at most; all that was to be seen was a great pile of debris—bricks, broken doors, wrecked furniture, plaster, beams, and rafters. It was safe to suppose that the Prussian who had laughed so boisterously, who had

been so overbearing in his self-confidence and brutal strength, was somewhere in the midst of this. Gerhardt laughed softly, as if to himself.

"It was a stroke of irony," said he, "that the first German shell fired into Antwerp should have found Hiegler and myself."

It was then they heard a noise immediately behind them, and turning sharply, beheld a sight that in those grim and strange surroundings was not a little surprising.

A broken door, which had been blown completely from its hinges, was seen to move like a living thing. There was a noise which bore some small resemblance to a human cough. And then the figure of a man arose in the moonlight like a ghost; and once again Bob Cunningham found himself face to face with his old adversary, von Hiegler.

Each stood regarding the other in stupefied amazement. And it is, perhaps, not such a strange thing that Bob should then have remembered the evening he had first seen the Prussian, in his long grey coat and spiked helmet, standing beneath the trees in the wooded valley of the Aisne, with the red glow of sunset in the west.

Von Hiegler shook himself, after the manner of a great dog, and then burst into his loud, raucous laugh, slapping Bob upon the back.

"Our conversation," said he, "was interrupted —somewhat suddenly. I trust, Gerhardt," he added, turning to his lieutenant, "I trust you are not hurt?"

"No more than bruised, Herr Captain. And yourself?"

"I am most infernally damaged," replied the other. "I ache in every limb. *Himmel!* I wonder I am still alive."

All this time shells were bursting near to them. The noise was deafening and continuous. The part of the city in which they were—the sleepy suburb of Berchem—seemed to be suffering most from the bombardment. On every hand loud and momentary explosions rent the air. The night was frequently illumined by broad flashes of light, almost blinding to the eyes. In addition to the shells themselves that shrieked and hooted in the air, small broken fragments—segments and fuses and chips of masonry—flew right and left with sharp twanging sounds, like those which can be made upon the strings of a banjo or guitar.

"Come," said von Hiegler. "This is no place for a Prussian, a faithful servant of His Majesty the Emperor. Gerhardt, if the car is not too much damaged, we may even yet get through the Belgian lines."

Neither of the Germans had been seriously injured. The shell which had struck the house had carried away the central supporting wall, and brought down the whole building like a house of cards. All three were lucky to have escaped with their lives; and this seeming miracle was wholly due to the fact that the roof and upper story had

fallen away from the road towards the yard by way of which Bob had managed to enter.

For this same reason the car, though covered in dust, fragments, and litter, dented in several places, and with one of the mud-guards torn away, was still in working order, as Gerhardt quickly proved.

Bob saw at once what was about to happen. Von Hiegler's suit-case, containing his priceless papers, the possession of which would be worth thousands to the German General Staff, were in the car. The Prussian knew the countersign for the night; in addition to which he had, perhaps, some secret way of his own through the Belgian and British line-of-defence.

As Bob knew well enough, these papers must never reach the valley of the Nethe, where the German army was encamped. Once master of the information they contained, the German general would be prepared for a sudden exodus from the city, and the Allied forces would stand but a poor chance of ever reaching a position of security.

The boy looked at von Hiegler, and saw that the Prussian was so stiff in his joints that he could hardly drag one foot behind the other.

It is well enough known that he who hesitates is lost, and by now it should be plain that Bob Cunningham was not much given to irresolution. With one spring he was upon the foot-board of the car. Seizing the suit-case, he turned, and started to run.

"Look out!" roared von Hiegler, in a voice that was like the bellowing of a bull. "Look out! The scoundrel's off!"

Gerhardt, who had been examining the engine, looked up in the nick of time. A second later his foot shot out, and Bob was tripped up. The leather suit-case flew from the boy's hands, and he stumbled several paces forward, to lie prone among the bricks that strewed the pavement.

Before he could rise both the Germans were upon him, like hounds on a beaten fox. To struggle, as he knew too well, was useless. Without a word he resigned himself to his fate.

Von Hiegler chuckled, as he took off his revolver lanyard and bound Bob's only arm to the web belt of his equipment.

"You are too slippery, my friend," said he; "slippery as an eel. It is disastrous to forget you for a moment."

Bob felt his heart sink within him as they led him towards the car, the engine of which was now running freely. It seemed that this man, von Hiegler, stood between him and destiny; that the Prussian would dog his footsteps through all eternity itself.

There are moments when the stoutest heart must fail, and just now Bob Cunningham had cause to rue the day he took the man by surprise, and held him for a few brief moments captive. As we have said, from the day he landed at Havre he had realized to the full the possibility of death or wounds.

It now appeared that it was his fate to be held by the enemy; to pass, perhaps, the remaining period to the end of the war in some lonely German fortress.

His chances of escape were small. Though von Hiegler had lost his revolver in the ruins, Gerhardt was armed, and Bob was at their mercy. The boy's misfortune seemed all the greater for two reasons: firstly, he could not rid his mind of Désirée and her father who were still awaiting his return, whilst the great shells rained upon the city; secondly, the spy's secret papers, upon which so much depended, were actually within his grasp, had he been at liberty to take them—and he was powerless to help the Allied cause.

Von Hiegler picked up the suit-case, and threw it into the car, and then, turning to his lieutenant, spoke in German. Bob tried his best to understand, but could gather no more than the drift of what was said.

Gerhardt urged that they should make for the German lines without delay. With the help of the countersign, and their uniforms of the Antwerp Civic Guard, they could run past the sentries at the Porte de Malines. The main difficulty with which they were confronted was what to do with their captive. To this problem they could, at first, find no solution, and even Bob himself could not refrain from smiling at their perplexity. They could not let their prisoner go; they did not care to kill him in cold blood, and neither did it appear that they

could take him with them without incurring considerable risk.

Gerhardt's suggestion was to leave the boy behind, gagged and bound hand and foot; but to this the Prussian would not agree. He pointed out that daylight was fast approaching, that refugees were already moving in the streets—people who had come to the conclusion that even their cellars were no longer safe—and soon the Englishman would be found. Various head-quarters in the city were in telephonic communication with the trenches, and the car would be stopped at one of the Belgian examining posts upon the main road that enters Antwerp from the south.

In the city itself there was no place where they could hide the boy. Had the house which they had rented during the past three weeks not been razed to the ground, they could have locked him up. Upon one point they appeared to have little doubt: all would be well if they could but get their captive past the guard at the Porte de Malines to the hamlet of Vieux Dieu, where it seemed they had a friend.

Finally, it was decided that Bob should play the part of a severely wounded man. His arm was already in a sling; and now another gag was placed in his mouth, over which a field bandage was bound so tightly that he could breathe only through his nostrils, and that not with any degree of comfort. To complete the thing, a second bandage secured his uninjured arm to his side, so that it looked as if

his ribs had been broken, and he was enwrapped like an Egyptian mummy, lying back in the car, unable either to speak or move.

Von Hiegler sat at his side, with the suit-case between them. Gerhardt drove, now and again throwing a question over his shoulder at his captain, though never in a voice much louder than a whisper. The car moved at a steady pace through the deserted streets, and presently they came in sight of the walls of the city and the guard-house, loopholed like a castle. As they drove under the archway, a line of bayonets glistened in the light of a brazier, and a voice rang out:

"*Halte! Qui vive?*"

It was Gerhardt who answered. Von Hiegler, in the uniform of the Civic Guard, was wiser than to trust himself to speak.

"Members of the Civic Guard," said Gerhardt. "We go to Fort Number Five with a wounded man—a civilian who has information for the commandant."

A lantern flashed in their faces. The sergeant of the guard examined each in turn. When he came to Bob, he gave vent to an exclamation of surprise.

"*Ma foi!*" said he. "*Vraiment*, he is badly hurt!"

"Struck by a shell," said Gerhardt. "We must get him to the fort before he dies. Come, friend, let us pass. There is little time to lose."

"The countersign?" said the sergeant.

Gerhardt leaned forward, and whispered the magic word: "*Louvain.*"

A moment later, the car was purring forward in open country, along an avenue of plane trees, whilst a big blood-red sun rose towards the east, and the great shells shrieked and hooted thousands of feet above them in the air.

Von Hiegler chuckled again.

"Friend Gerhardt," said he, "that was nobly done. And now, to Jean Le Tellier's. We will get rid of the Englishman there."

CHAPTER XIX

Jean Le Tellier

THOUGH the Germans had some good reason to congratulate themselves on having passed the quarter-guard at the old gates of the city, they were far from pleased at the rapidity with which the daylight was approaching.

As the car moved forward, they conversed together, and Bob gathered from as much as he could understand that they had already given up all hope of getting through to the Nethe until darkness had again set in. The name of Jean Le Tellier was mentioned frequently, and the boy was left to wonder who this might be.

All this time his thoughts were none of the pleasantest. Every minute brought him nearer to the German lines and farther from his friends. At the Porte de Malines he had experienced feelings that were little short of anguish. The Belgian sergeant of the guard, with a dozen loaded rifles at his back, had been within an arm's length of the poor, gagged, helpless captive, who could have enlightened him so easily as to the real identity of the two so-called Civic Guardsmen.

It was broad daylight when the car skirted Vieux Dieu—in which place many houses were on fire—and running along a narrow winding lane, pulled up before an old farm-house, half-hidden in a grove of trees.

Almost immediately the door opened, and there appeared a dark, thin man, very tall, with narrow stooping shoulders, who seized the Prussian by an arm, and spoke excitedly in French.

"You are too late!" said he. "Why did you not come before? I have waited half the night. Death of a dog!" he exclaimed on setting eyes upon Bob. "What have we here?"

"An Englishman," said Gerhardt; "the most wilful, pig-headed rascal in the world. We brought him through the gate under the very noses of the sentries." The joke was evidently still good, for Gerhardt laughed heartily and long.

"An Englishman!" let out the tall man. "You might have put him out of the way by a simpler method, with less risk to yourselves."

"Enough!" cried von Hiegler in his boisterous manner. "Answer a plain question, Jean: can you get us through to-day?"

The tall man shrugged. "Impossible!" said he.

"Then," said von Hiegler, "there is no help for it. We must hide the car and wait till dusk."

Bob was thrown neck and crop into the road, where he lay quite stiff and helpless; and then the car was backed into an outhouse, a kind of barn, where there was a great quantity of hay, oats, and bran.

As the three men left the barn, von Hiegler jerked a thumb towards the forage.

"In a day or so," said he, "all that will be welcomed by our Prussian Uhlans."

Gerhardt and the tall man—who, indeed, was Jean Le Tellier—lifted Bob and carried him into the house. There, after his feet had been tightly bound together, he was thrown upon a bed in a small room, which was divided by a thin wooden partition from a large old-fashioned kitchen. The three men forgathered in this kitchen; and since Le Tellier could not apparently speak German, Bob was able to listen to their talk.

From this he learned much that was of interest; but if one thing surprised him more than another, it was that any man could be guilty of such perfidy as this Jean Le Tellier, who, in fact, was a spy who was Belgian-born.

It was he who had actually secured the majority of the papers that von Hiegler carried in his suitcase. The man boasted openly that, although his house was not half a mile from the trenches, by means of smoke signals he had communicated with the German army.

He was much annoyed that the two Germans had come too late. In this section of the line-of-defence, the trenches were not continuous; and it was possible for one who knew every inch of the country to creep through the outposts under cover of darkness. Such an attempt, however, could not be made in broad daylight. For the present there was nothing

for the three spies to do but to lie like foxes in hiding throughout the day.

They made the best of it. Le Tellier produced a pack of cards and a box of choice cigars, and they gambled the morning away, to the profit of von Hiegler and the discomfiture of Gerhardt.

And Bob Cunningham lay mute and motionless, and impotent to avert a great catastrophe. So thin was the wall that he could hear even the cards thrown upon the table, and the clink of money as it passed from hand to hand.

And all this time the German shells were screaming overhead. One after the other, without respite, without pity, they descended upon the great stricken city.

Bob knew well enough that, as soon as it was dark, Le Tellier would set out upon his journey, guiding the two Germans to the Nethe, von Hiegler taking with him the secret papers that would, perhaps, betray the whole Belgian army, and bring about an unparalleled disaster.

Minutes passed like hours; and then, when it was well past six o'clock in the afternoon, von Hiegler entered, apparently to see that his prisoner was secure.

"We leave you here, my friend," said he. "You will suffer some discomfort, I am afraid; but for that you have no one but yourself to blame. In a day or so I shall return—when our army makes its triumphal entry in Antwerp."

At that he went out, leaving Bob once again

to his thoughts, and presently the boy heard the engine of the motor-car, and knew that the three spies were about to set out upon their journey.

He was by then well-nigh distracted. He had already looked about him for some method of escape, but had racked his brains in vain.

Desperation is, indeed, a kind of strength in itself. Pressing his heels together, he strained with all his force — and on a sudden the cord snapped which bound his ankles.

Quickly he got to his feet. He was resolved to stake all upon any venture, however rash and hopeless it might seem. There was still talking in the kitchen. Listening, he recognized the voices of Gerhardt and Le Tellier. Von Hiegler was with the motor-car in the barn.

Field bandages are not shackles of iron. With great difficulty he managed to pass the bandage that had been wound about his wrist over the knob of the bedpost. Then, with the help of all his weight, he tore the bandage in half.

It took him a few priceless minutes to free his serviceable arm; and then it was the work of a moment to pluck the gag from his mouth.

He was still unarmed, but he was free; and von Hiegler was alone.

As noiselessly as possible he opened the window and climbed through, to find himself in the farmyard. A dozen steps on tiptoe brought him to the barn door.

There he could see von Hiegler. The Germans

intended to leave Le Tellier's farm in the car, to go by road to the north-eastern part of the line-of-defence, where the traitor knew of a way through the Belgian lines.

Von Hiegler was attending to the lamps. It was now dark. For all that, Bob was able to see the holster which the Prussian carried at his waist, and was relieved to observe that it was empty. The Prussian, also, was unarmed.

Bob in savage triumph snatched up a pitchfork that was lying among the hay, and, springing forward, raised it as if about to bury the sharp points in the Prussian's chest.

"One word," he cried, "and I kill you!"

Von Hiegler let out an oath, and then carried a hand to his empty holster. A moment later, quite suddenly, he struck out with all his force. Bob, dropping his pitchfork, sprang quickly aside. The Prussian had the greatest difficulty in saving himself from a fall; and before he had rightly recovered his balance Bob's fist caught him fair upon the chin.

He reeled, and then toppled over, to lie unconscious, like a slaughtered ox, among the bran and oats and hay.

Bob, looking down at the man, spoke in a hurried whisper.

"If I spare your life," said he, "I do so only because you might have taken mine, and did not do so."

At that he searched von Hiegler's pockets, and

found that for which he sought — a bunch of keys.

It took time to find the right key for the suit-case. He was so trembling with excitement that the bunch jangled in his hand.

He knew quite well that at any moment Gerhardt and Le Tellier might come from the house, or enter the bedroom where the boy had been imprisoned.

At last the case was opened, and Bob stuffed the papers, one after the other, into the pocket of his coat. As he turned to go, von Hiegler was seen to move, and at the same time, to his consternation, Bob heard voices outside the barn.

He had intended to escape on foot. But now, if Gerhardt and Le Tellier were without, he would be recognized at once; and the Belgian spy, with his long legs, looked like a man who could run. The boldest course is often the safest. Bob decided to steal the motor-car itself.

It was then that von Hiegler raised himself upon an elbow, and let out a groan. As he did so, Bob snatched up the *képi* of the Antwerp Civic Guard which had fallen to the ground, and thrust it on to his own head. A cap alone is but a poor disguise, but there was no time for further preparations. When Gerhardt and Le Tellier were not twenty paces from the barn, and as the Prussian struggled to his feet, the car drove out into the yard with Bob Cunningham at the wheel.

Fortunately for him, in the darkness he was not

recognized at first. Not unnaturally he was taken for von Hiegler.

"All is ready?" asked Le Tellier.

Bob answered nothing, but drove straight past them, making for the yard gate. He was safe if only he could gain the road.

But before he did so, von Hiegler rushed like a mad dog from the barn, appearing in the moonlight, shaking a fist in the air, and calling loudly upon his friends to stop the car.

Gerhardt whipped out his revolver, and fired three times in quick succession. The bullets whistled close to the boy's head as he rounded the opened gate, and a moment later he was speeding down the road.

CHAPTER XX

"No Thoroughfare"

Bob looked back once before he turned a corner and the farm-house was lost to view behind a clump of trees; and then it was all that he could do to refrain from open laughter. Gerhardt was firing wildly; Le Tellier clenched both his fists and raised them slowly above his head, as if he blamed the rising moon for the trick that had been played them. As for von Hiegler, he was like a maniac. So exasperated was he that he had no thought of his own great danger, but set forward in pursuit, filling the night with ill-sounding German oaths.

Bob had a clear run to the Porte de Malines. None the less that drive was fraught with danger. As he approached the ancient walls, he found that the shells, which still rained fast upon the city, had torn up great holes in the roadway between the tram-lines. Before him it seemed as if all Antwerp were on fire. Red flames shot upward, whilst clouds of smoke hung like curtains above the countless roofs and the tall spires of churches.

More than once he ran into wire. Segments of shell had cut the telegraph wires and the overhead

wires of the tramway, and these lay here and there in coils, or hung in strange festoons upon the lamp-posts and the trees. There were few things about a motor-car that Bob Cunningham did not know, but, since he was now obliged to drive with one hand, he took the precaution of going quite slowly. And it is well for him he did so; or he would have driven into a shell hole and overturned the car, or become hopelessly entangled in all this twisted mass of wire.

He had reached the aviation ground, and could see the old walls silhouetted before the glow of the burning city, when he was amazed to see the figure of a woman coming towards him on the road.

That a woman should be outside the walls on such a night as this, and moreover walking as in haste towards the sound of the guns, was in itself sufficiently surprising. He slowed down, thinking that he might be able to render some assistance to one bereft of her senses; and it was as if a blow had been struck him when he recognized Désirée D'Avignon.

"You!" he cried, staring as if he saw a ghost.

"Ah!" she exclaimed; "I have found you. The good God be thanked!"

She spoke in French, and held out a hand which he seized eagerly in his.

"Tell me," he asked, "how comes it you are here?"

"I was so anxious," she answered, "when you did not come back. I knew not what to do. We

waited for so long. It has been a day of terror. Berchem, Wilryk, and Hoboken are destroyed. Many houses are on fire. At last, towards midday, I could stand the suspense no longer. I went out to look for you."

"In the midst of the shells?" he asked.

"That was nothing," she smiled. "I did not think of them. I wished to know what had become of you."

"And your father?"

"I hope he is safe," said Désirée; "I do not know. This morning, when the bombardment was at its worst, your splendid friend, Private Sharp, came to see us, and told us the city was to be evacuated, that the troops had received orders to leave the trenches to-night. He volunteered to take us from the city in his motor-bus."

She paused, as if ashamed to go on.

"And why did you not go?" said Bob.

"And leave you behind?" she asked.

"Why not?"

"I could not do it. My father did his best to persuade me; but for once I was determined. I told him to make good his escape; to wait for me at Burgh, on the other side of the river."

"And he consented?"

"I just left him," she made answer, "and set out to look for you."

"And why at Burgh?"

"Because," she said, "the main bridge is to be blown up."

Bob started. For the first time he realized the danger they were in. There was a chance that Désirée and himself would be left on the eastern bank of the Schelde.

"Jump in!" he cried. "Be quick!"

As she seated herself at his side she spoke softly under her breath. She was apparently quite calm and self-possessed.

"I fear we are too late."

"Do you mean," he exclaimed, "that you think the bridge has already gone?"

"I think so," she made answer. "Shortly before I met you I heard a great explosion, louder than the bursting of a shell."

For a while there was a silence. Bob's mind was working quickly. There was a pontoon bridge at Hoboken, but this was only for pedestrians. If they could not cross the river, and the Germans advanced upon the city, they would have but a small chance of making good their escape. It was Désirée who spoke at last.

"Tell me," she asked, "how came you to find a motor-car? I thought there were none in Antwerp."

Bob laughed aloud. "It was von Hiegler's," said he. "I captured it."

Désirée clapped her hands.

"Magnificent!" she cried.

"And more than that," the boy went on, "I gained possession of their papers — papers that would be worth a fortune to the German Staff."

The girl rocked from side to side, as a happy child will do.

"You have done well," she said, and then added: "and I, too, have done well—to find you."

"You have indeed!" said Bob. "But you have not yet told me what made you leave the city."

"I searched everywhere," said Désirée, "and at last came to the Porte de Malines, where I questioned the Belgian guard. They told me that at daybreak this morning a motor-car had passed through the gate, in which there were two civic guardsmen and a wounded man, who was so bound up in bandages that he was like a mummy. I guessed it was von Hiegler, Gerhardt, and you, and so set forward on foot, walking towards the river. All the evening I looked for you," she went on. "It seemed hopeless, and yet, somehow I could not give up hope. And then, when I was very near despair, we met—I suppose, by chance."

At first Bob Cunningham dared not trust himself to speak. There was something in the girl's splendid courage and devotion that made him look upon the whole world in a new and wondrous light. Hitherto they had been great friends; but now danger and adversity had brought them so near together that they realized, with mingled delight and fear, that throughout whatsoever the future held in store, their lives were bound together.

"I think," said Bob, "the Fates are on our side, after all."

"I think so too," she answered with a smile. And that was the end of their Friendship, and the beginning of Something Else—with which we cannot for the present be concerned.

A little later the car drew up before the Porte de Malines; and of this gate, the main entrance into Antwerp from the south, in order to understand what follows, it is necessary to know a few important facts.

The gate itself, protected by an ancient "keep", or castle, is made of wrought iron, protected by those sharp-pointed, X-shaped railings which are known as *chevaux de frise.* The city walls are about forty feet in height, and surrounded by a moat across which a drawbridge leads to the Porte. When Bob stopped the car abruptly about twenty paces from the moat, it was because he and Désirée found themselves confronted by obstacles impossible to surmount.

The Belgian guard had vanished. The iron gate was closed. The drawbridge had been blown up.

The truth dawned upon them by degrees. Antwerp had been evacuated, left to its fate. Already the great city, still under the scourge of the bombardment, lay at the mercy of the foe.

For the first time in all these strange adventurous days Bob Cunningham was afraid. He had no fear for himself, but he thought of the girl who had risked so much for him, whom it was his duty to save.

They were cut off from the city. They were on the wrong side of the river, and the Schelde at its mouth is by no means narrow. Bob turned the car, and as he did so tried to think things out.

There was no escape by way of Berchem. They must go to the west, and endeavour to find some means of crossing the river. The Allied troops were probably no longer in possession of the trenches. Bob and Désirée were in the centre of a triangle formed by the inaccessible walls of the city, the broad, flooded Schelde, and the great German host, which presently would advance to take possession of the town.

The boy looked about him in distress.

"What are we to do?" he cried. "We are stranded. There is no way of escape."

"We must try the foot-bridge," said Désirée. "If that has been destroyed, we may have the good fortune to find a boat."

Bob said nothing, but drove the car forward, turning their backs upon the burning city.

In the night it looked as if half Antwerp were in flames. The clouds, illumined from beneath, were crimson, purple, and gold.

In order to reach the Schelde they had to run back some distance the same way they had come. And then, from the main road that goes to Vieux Dieu, Bob turned to the right, taking that winding lane that runs more or less parallel to the railway line, just inside the second ring of forts.

Some of these forts had already been reduced to

mere heaps of rubble by the concentrated fire of the German guns; others had been dismantled and evacuated that same afternoon. At any rate, the line was no longer defended. Not an armed man stood between the German forces and the walls of the ill-fated city.

The car ran out of a wood; and Bob, recognizing danger ahead in the nick of time, jammed on the brakes and stopped. Immediately before them was a road, upon the top of which were the motionless figures of nine mounted men.

They were like statues in the moonlight. Nor was it possible to mistake them for anything but Prussian Uhlans. Each wore the peculiar flat-topped helmet and carried his lance at rest.

Désirée clutched at the boy's arm and spoke in a whisper.

"The road is barred!" she said.

"There is no other way," said Bob, "if we are to reach the river."

"Wait," she told him. "Perhaps they have not seen us. They may go."

No doubt this was good advice; and they might have escaped unseen, had not the Fates—who a moment since they had prided themselves were on their side—now deserted them and played them false. Von Hiegler—though, for the time being, they had forgotten him—had still to be reckoned with.

It will be remembered Bob had last seen the Prussian running after the car when he escaped

from the farm. There could have been little doubt in the man's mind which road the young Englishman would take. As far as Bob was concerned, there was but one road to safety—namely, that which led to the Porte de Malines. Le Tellier—who was proficient in his vile trade of spy—may have known that the trenches were no longer held by the Allied troops; but, in any case, von Hiegler was prepared to take the gravest risks. He may have been filled with feelings of animosity towards Bob, who had outwitted him again; but he desired over all things to regain possession of his papers. Accordingly, accompanied by his two companions, he set off across country, taking a short cut direct to the Porte de Malines.

They had not gone far before they fell in with an old man, seated on the trunk of a fallen tree, who was weeping bitterly because his cottage had been burnt to the ground and his daughter killed before his eyes by a great shell that came from the clouds like a thunderbolt.

Jean Le Tellier, questioning this old, unhappy peasant, gleaned the intelligence that the drawbridge at the Porte had been blown up, and that in consequence there was no way of retreat by way of Berchem. It was soon after that that they heard the sound of a motor-car travelling westward, following the direction of the railroad.

Von Hiegler had little doubt that this was Bob. Indeed, it could be no one else, since no vehicles of any sort had been allowed to pass the city gates

after nightfall, and it was now approaching midnight.

Followed by Gerhardt and Le Tellier, the Prussian set off running, crossed a sandy ridge, and dived into a wood, to emerge on a small, rounded hillock that overlooked the railway line and a road.

Immediately before him was a motor-car, stationary, but with the engine running smoothly, which, in the bright moonshine, he had no difficulty in recognizing as his own.

His first instinct was to shoot, and had he had a revolver, there is small doubt he would have done so. As it was, he turned to his companions, pointing excitedly towards the car.

"Fire, you idiots!" he cried.

But Jean Le Tellier was no such fool.

"Lie down!" he whispered. "They have not seen us, and there are Uhlans on the road."

"Uhlans! Prussian Uhlans! Where?"

Le Tellier pointed to the sky-line. Von Hiegler saw, and gave a grunt of satisfaction.

All this while Désirée and Bob sat side by side, waiting in suspense, their hearts beating violently. The figures of the mounted men were still quite motionless, firm as rocks across their path.

"Will they never go?" she whispered.

"See," said Bob, "they draw nearer together, as if to speak."

"It is well," said the girl after a long pause. "They have not seen us."

"But they may have heard the engine!" exclaimed the boy.

"Perhaps not," she answered. "The wind is the other way."

They waited patiently for at least another minute; and then on a sudden the girl let out a shriek, which she was not able to suppress.

"Look there!" she cried. "Drive on, we are in danger!" As she spoke she pointed to the left of the road, where they could see three dark, shadowy figures slowly emerging from a clump of thickets.

At that moment someone fired, and a bullet whistled past, to bury itself deep in the embankment. The three shadows rose, took upon themselves the shapes of living men, who rushed quite suddenly upon them.

On the spur of the moment Bob let the car go, driving straight for the Uhlans.

There was nothing for it but to attempt to run the gauntlet. If they remained where they were, they were most surely captured. Gathering velocity at every turn of the wheel, the car flew up the ridge.

CHAPTER XXI

The Broken Bridge

A PRUSSIAN Uhlan may be a formidable fellow in his way. For instance, he may know how to charge or use his lance with effect; he may even be a great looter, a burner of many houses, and a fitting instrument in every way by which the Doctrine of Frightfulness may be spread. For all that—even when there are nine of them together—he is no match for a motor-car, travelling at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

Le Tellier and Gerhardt fired repeatedly; von Hiegler shouted himself hoarse. The Uhlans, waving their lances, made a brave show of resistance, but scattered like so many chickens as soon as ever the car threatened to run them down.

Bob flew onward upon a level, moonlit road, travelling due west, leaving the burning city to his right. The girl crouched at his side, listening to the bullets that every now and then came whistling overhead.

Looking back, they could see the Uhlans, who seemed to be in two minds as to what they ought to do. One, who had dismounted, or else been

thrown, was beating his horse, which had shied at the passing car, and was now endeavouring to break away.

Presently von Hiegler and his two companions became visible upon the sky-line. Their figures were plainly silhouetted against the red glow of the burning city.

It may with safety be presumed that the Prussian's language was by no means complimentary. He was seen to strike one of the troopers so suddenly and violently that he knocked the man down, and then, seizing his horse, put foot to stirrup and swung into the saddle.

As he did so, they heard him shout his orders in his loud, boisterous voice. Désirée understood his meaning, and translated his words to Bob as the car raced forward in the night.

It appears that the Prussian guessed that the fugitives would attempt to cross the river. Accordingly he ordered Gerhardt to ride post-haste to the south, where he would fall in with a Bavarian division, and where he could obtain a motor-car. This he was to drive at full speed over the bridge at Bornhem, and thence race to Hoboken, where he was to await von Hiegler.

On hearing this, Bob Cunningham recognized that their chances of escape were small. There was the foot-bridge across the river leading to Hoboken; but, even if it were possible to cross by this, they would have to go quite slowly, and von Hiegler would be able to keep the fugitives in

sight. The probability was that Bob and Désirée would not reach Hoboken much in advance of Gerhardt, who was making a considerable detour towards the south.

However, they had no choice but to go straight forward. There was no turning back. Le Tellier had followed the Prussian's example, and was now mounted; and no sooner had von Hiegler given his orders than, setting spurs to his horse, he started forward in pursuit.

The car was still travelling rapidly; and very soon, in spite of the flatness of the country and the brightness of the moonshine, the horsemen were out of sight. But soon after Bob reached the river bank, and slowed down to turn sharply to the right, he heard the loud clattering of hoofs upon the roadway.

They were now obliged to go quite slowly, since they followed no regular road, but an old cart-track, where the ground was so rough that they were repeatedly bumped and jostled in their seats.

By the time they gained the end of the foot-bridge they were in considerable danger. Von Hiegler and his followers had made a short cut across country, and were now quite close at hand. The bridge itself had not been made for vehicles, and it was extremely doubtful whether they would be able to get the car across.

At a snail's pace Bob drove down the ramp that led to the first pontoon. As he did so, he noticed that on every hand there were boxes of supplies and

ammunition, which appeared to have been thrown away in the disorder of the retreat. It was, indeed, by this bridge that the troops had retired from the trenches between Fort Number Six and Wilryk.

The bridge was wide enough, but it was a question of inches, and the chesses creaked loudly as they took the weight of the car. Désirée for the first time was alarmed.

"Do you think it safe?" she asked.

"There is no other way," said Bob.

"There is," she cried. "There are boats. I saw several moored together by the river bank."

Bob said nothing, but drove on, little realizing that they were going to what must have seemed certain death or capture.

As the car moved forward across that insecure and narrow pathway, with the dark water on either hand, Désirée D'Avignon looked back to see if she could catch sight of their pursuers.

The great city lay still under the scourge of the bombardment. The cannons still thundered in the valley of the Nethe. Shells shrieked and hooted overhead. Red flames from burning buildings licked the sky, and great clouds of black smoke rolled over them in countless legions. Here and there amid the fires, the girl could see the framework of churches, already reduced to ruins—windows, arches, and pillars, standing like martyrs in the flames.

Her attention was rooted to the sight, which somehow seemed to fascinate her, when suddenly

Bob gave vent to a cry which was at once an exclamation of horror and dismay.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"The bridge!" he cried. "The bridge has been destroyed!"

The car had been brought to an abrupt and sudden halt. Looking downward, Désirée found that she was not five feet from the black and sullen water, moving rapidly northward towards the sea.

In the greatest haste both descended from the car. They found themselves at the end of a kind of pier. The western bank was not far distant, for they could see the tall trees and a row of cottages beyond the water. However, it was not possible to advance farther. The bridge had been either destroyed by a German shell or blown up by the Allied troops to cover their retreat.

"We must go back!" cried Désirée. "We must go back to the boats!"

Bob saw at once that there was nothing else to do. There was not room in which to turn the car. Seizing the girl by a hand, he led her in the greatest haste back towards the eastern side of the river.

Before they came in sight of the river bank they realized that they would have little chance of gaining the place where Désirée had seen the boats; for suddenly von Hiegler and his Uhlans appeared like spectres on the sky-line, and then swept down upon the bridge.

"Look out!" she cried; and then, as hope went

from her heart, "We are lost!" she uttered. "Look there! We are discovered!"

As she spoke, she pointed into the darkness; and Bob Cunningham saw a tall, dark figure rush in upon them on a sudden like a tiger.

As this man came forward, he fired. There was a bright flash before their eyes, and a bullet sang past into the river. And a moment after, Bob's fist rang out upon the sharp-pointed chin of Jean Le Tellier, the spy.

As he struck, the boy realized that his own life and the life of one who was more dear to him than all else in the world depended upon that blow. The Belgian straightened, and stood for a moment swaying, but quite rigid. And it was then that a second blow, fiercer even than the first, sent him headlong and senseless to the ground. There he rolled over like a log, to fall into the water with a splash.

They had no time just then to watch the place where he and his perfidy was ended. His death was his deserts; his life had been a stain upon the honour of a noble nation. For von Hiegler and his Uhlans closed in upon the bridge. Désirée, telling Bob to follow, turned and ran. As for the Prussian, he must have guessed that the bridge had been blown up; for, ordering four of his men to follow in pursuit, he went himself with the others to the boats, and presently they heard the oars plashing in the water.

By then Bob and Désirée had reached the ex-

tremity of the broken bridge; and here a fresh shock awaited them. As they gained the place where they had left the motor-car, they heard, to their utmost consternation, the sound of another car flying northward on the opposite side of the river.

"Do you hear that?" cried Bob. "Do you know what it means?"

"It is Gerhardt," she answered. That was all.

"We cannot go back," said he. "The Uhlans hold the bridge."

"If we remain here," she said, "we are caught like rats in a trap. I can swim; but can you—with your wounded arm?"

For answer Bob Cunningham knelt down, and with quick hands unlaced his boots.

"And now," said he, "I swear one thing: if you drown, we die together."

"I would rather that," she answered, "than be taken by the Bosches."

And at that, they plunged together into the stream; and even as they did so, the powerful head-lights of Gerhardt's car came into sight upon the western bank.

CHAPTER XXII

A Race to the Frontier

THE river was swollen, and the current of the Schelde is strong. Désirée D'Avignon had not overrated her powers when she said that she could swim; but one must be a strong swimmer to swim with clothes on, and moreover, Bob had but a single arm.

The boy soon found that he could not keep himself afloat by means of a breast or side stroke. He therefore turned over upon his back, propelling himself forward by means of his legs, and being careful to keep his chest expanded and his head well thrown back.

Even then his strength was soon exhausted. The water saturated his clothes, and so weighed him down that presently, realizing that he was quite overtaxed, and being seized by the cold fear that invariably takes hold upon a man in such a situation, he cried out that he was drowning.

With a few swift strokes the girl was at his side.

"Courage!" she told him. "There is but a little way to go. Lie still, and float."

Supporting his head, and keeping his nostrils above water, she struck out for the western bank, upon which the trees now appeared quite close. By her presence of mind and supreme heroic effort there is no doubt she saved his life; but it took all her strength to do it. When finally her feet touched ground, and hand in hand they struggled to the shore, the girl felt that she was about to faint; and had not Bob supported her, she would, indeed, have fallen.

Fortunately for them, the moon was now masked behind a bank of clouds; and though the fires of the burning city illumined the eastern bank, this side of the river was shrouded in utter darkness. Quite near at hand, upon the roadway, they could see the lights of Gerhardt's car.

They could not go on at once, for they were exhausted and out of breath. As they waited, with the water pouring from their clothes, and the girl's hair all lank and dripping, they heard von Hiegler's boat approaching the western shore.

"Come," whispered Désirée; "we must hasten on!"

They were not fifty yards from Gerhardt, who then shouted to his captain. Von Hiegler answered at once, telling the lieutenant to look out for the fugitives, who had endeavoured to swim the river and could not be far away.

Luckily, Gerhardt had not yet discovered the western end of the bridge. Leaving his car, he walked along the river's edge—and in the wrong

direction. Had he turned to the left—instead of to the right—he could not have failed to have found them.

Hand in hand, the two fugitives—boy and girl—hurried on their way, keeping to the shadow of the trees. They were, as they well knew, about half-way between Hoboken and Burgh, at which latter place Désirée had arranged to meet her father.

They went forward half-running and half-walking; for, now that they had recovered their breath, they were willing enough to do all they could to warm themselves; the river had been icy cold. In quick, bated undertones, they discussed what chances they had of falling in with D'Avignon. The girl was convinced that her father would never leave without news of her.

After a while they halted, and looked back. Gerhardt's car was still stationary. Von Hiegler and his companions had evidently joined the lieutenant on the same bank of the river as themselves. They could not hear their voices, but the head-lights of the car from time to time flickered like a signalling lamp, a sure sign that men were moving to and fro. Désirée, straining her eyes in the darkness, made out the shadow of several houses, standing at the river-side towards the north.

"There is Burgh!" she cried. "There is our destination!"

Breaking into a run, they soon found themselves in a dark and narrow street. There were no lights in any of the windows, and the street lamps were

out. As far as they could discover, there was not a living soul about.

"There is no sign of him," said Bob.

"He is here," said the girl, quite positive. "I know it."

Bob looked back upon the road by which they had come, and saw at once that the lights of Gerhardt's car were rapidly becoming larger and more bright. He pointed this out to Désirée. The girl clasped her hands and looked about her in distress. Then, summoning all her courage, she called loudly upon D'Avignon by the name of "Father".

Almost immediately a quick, eager cry came from somewhere out of the darkness; and a moment after Dr. D'Avignon held his daughter in his arms.

"You are safe!" he cried. "You are both safe. My heart rejoices."

Bob pointed excitedly in the direction of the German car.

"We are in greater danger than ever," he exclaimed. "In that motor-car are both Gerhardt and von Hiegler."

D'Avignon looked once, and then rapped loudly with a crutch upon the door of a cottage near at hand.

"Leconte!" he cried. "Leconte, come out! There is no time to lose!"

"Leconte!" echoed Désirée. "Monsieur Leconte is here?"

"Yes," said the Doctor. "He heard of the evacuation, and came north to find us. It was

Private Sharp who told him he would find me at Burgh."

At that moment Monsieur Leconte himself burst into the street. As the door opened, they saw his figure against the light which had not been visible before. He was all wrapped up in motor furs, and looked more stout and circular than ever.

"What is it?" he exclaimed.

"To the car!" cried D'Avignon. "The Germans are at hand."

All four hastened down the street, where presently they come across Leconte's canary-coloured Daimler.

It did not take them five seconds to jump into their places, and then the great car drove through the narrow street; and even as they left the little hamlet of Burgh, they recognized von Hiegler's voice, raised in a loud Prussian oath, and looking back, they saw the great twin lights of the German car, following in pursuit.

Leconte drove as he had never driven before. He took sharp-angled corners in the darkness with as little hesitation as a man might show on crossing the street on a Sunday. They flew past St. Nicholas to Ghent, and thence to the old city of Bruges, which they reached at about the hour of daybreak.

Beyond a patrol of five mounted Uhlans, they encountered no one on the way; though once they were obliged to stop for a puncture, to change a wheel.

From Bruges, they took the road that runs north to Blankenbergh. Thence, they could strike the famous road that runs parallel to the dunes to Ostende, which has the reputation of being the finest motor-track in Europe.

The country in the neighbourhood of Bruges is as flat as the remainder of Flanders, but more thickly wooded. There were, however, straight stretches of road where it was possible to see for nearly a mile; and it was at the end of one of these that they caught sight of von Hiegler, still following in pursuit.

It was fortunate that Leconte was one of the finest drivers in Belgium, and that his car was both powerful and in good repair. In an incredibly short space of time they worked up to a speed of nearly fifty miles an hour. This is excessive when we come to consider the state of the Belgian roads, which are paved with cobble-stones that shake a car to pieces.

The sun came out and spread its warmth upon the countryside. It was an ideal autumn day, with a touch of keenness in the air, and a soft westerly breeze that brought the dead leaves floating to the ground.

It is hardly likely that a war waged between mighty nations, in an age of great inventions, could have brought forth a more breathless, headlong race. The two cars were well matched. Droning like enormous bees, they flew onward, mile upon mile, leaving behind them a great cloud of dust.

Leconte himself, carried away by excitement, shouted at the full power of his lungs. Désirée, with clasped hands, looked alternately forward and backward. Sometimes it seemed that they were gaining on their pursuers; at other times, they appeared to be losing ground.

They rushed through a straggling village, where no living soul was to be seen. Then, turning sharply to the left, they found themselves confronted by two closed railway gates at a level crossing.

Désirée caught her breath. D'Avignon clenched his teeth, and looked back to see if von Hiegler were still in sight. As for Leconte, he cried out that all was lost.

"Drive on!" cried Bob. "Drive on, and trust to luck!"

Bob had shouted like a madman. He knew well enough their lives were in the scales.

Leconte flew at the gate like a mad dog at its victim. There was a crash of broken wood and glass and crumpled tin. The great car seemed to shiver; they were all hurled forward, and then thrown back again; and before they had time to recover from the shock, or realize what had happened, there came a second crash, as the weight of the car fell upon the farther gate.

A moment after, they were through, still purring along the road. Their lamps had gone, the mud-guards and the tool-box had been swept away, and the bonnet resembled an old tin can upon an ash heap—but they were through and safe.

None the less, it was clear that they were no longer making headway. For the next mile the German car gained upon them, inch by inch; and presently, they heard the report of a rifle behind them, and a bullet flew past their ears.

Leconte carried in the car a Mauser pistol. It did not take Bob Cunningham half a minute to fit the butt to the pistol-grip. He had only one arm to shoot with, but there is not much weight in one of these useful little weapons; and the Prussian soon learnt that, if shooting was the order of the day, there was another that could play the same game, and one, moreover, who was an infinitely better shot than himself.

Still, Bob's marksmanship could not prevent the German car from drawing down upon them. Von Hiegler was now not more than three hundred yards away; and Leconte saw at once that, if he continued to hold to the main road, they could not fail to be overtaken. He therefore turned to the left, taking a narrow lane that led towards Ypres and Armentieres, in France. This lane was very winding, and the roadway so bad that it was not possible to travel fast. Still, since it led into a country where there were many trees, they hoped that they might yet be able to escape.

But the German car clung to them like a leech. At one time, Bob with a well-aimed shot smashed the glass in the screen. For all that, the Germans still came on, von Hiegler firing rapidly. And then, to their consternation, they ran out of a wood

into the low-lying marshland that is drained by the river Yser. About a mile to the front, they could see an old château, standing in a clump of trees, apparently an orchard.

Running in a straight line past this house was a white road by the side of a canal. On the road was a large party of men, evidently soldiers, marching in fours towards the south.

Leconte half-rose to his feet, and shouted.

"They are Belgians!" he cried. "Once we reach them we are safe."

And no sooner had the words left his lips than there came the loud explosion of a bursting tyre. One of von Hiegler's bullets had punctured a back wheel. On the instant, the car skidded from the road; and before they had time to realize what had happened, they were locked fast in thick, glutinous mud, at least two feet in depth.

Leconte threw up his arms with a gesture of despair. D'Avignon, remaining seated in the car, folded his arms in resignation. As for Bob, he stationed himself in the middle of the road, and reloaded his Mauser pistol.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Corps de Garde

IT was at that moment that the German car emerged from the wood. Bob, kneeling upon one knee in the road, took careful aim, and fired.

On the instant, the driver threw up his arms, and falling forward, disappeared from view, seeming to crumple up like an empty sack. There could be little doubt that the man had been shot stone-dead.

Von Hiegler, who had been seated next to him, seized the driver's wheel, and with great presence of mind kept the car on the road and brought it to a standstill.

Bob saw that they had still a chance of escape. If there was time for action, there was time for hope.

"Can you move the car?" he cried.

Both Leconte and D'Avignon were by then upon the roadway. Seizing the wheels by the spokes, they put forth all their strength; but their united efforts failed to release the car from the black, sticky mud in which it was locked fast. Bob emptied the magazine of his pistol, and his shots flew close enough to the Prussian to make him

think twice before he advanced. And then, both he and Désirée hastened to the assistance of the others.

With a great effort, they managed to move the car on to the narrow roadway. And there they left it, punctured and useless. It was manifest that without much difficulty the Germans would be able to clear it out of the way, but not without waste of time. And time, just then, was all they needed, time in which to overtake the Belgian soldiers, who were not more than a mile in front.

D'Avignon started off upon his crutches, swinging himself along faster than a man can walk, accompanied by his daughter and Leconte. As for Bob, he fell back more slowly, reloading his pistol as he went.

There is a humorous side to all things; and it was humorous, indeed, to see the good Monsieur Leconte attempting to run. He was so fat it was as much as he could do to walk, and he was now so encumbered by heavy motor furs that he resembled an enormous barrow; he was almost as wide as he was tall.

Bob was careful not to waste his ammunition. He fired seldom and with the greatest care; and the moral effect of his good shooting was obvious from the first. The driver had been killed; and now Lieutenant Gerhardt, the shaven-headed Saxon, who had proved himself time and again so impetuous and so gallant, was struck in the shoulder and let out a howl of pain.

Von Hiegler saw at once that, if they did not take cover, they would be picked off, one by one. Accordingly, he ordered his companions to leave the roadway, and find what shelter they could under the bank of the canal, and behind Leconte's broken-down and injured car.

This was exactly what the young Englishman desired. Every minute the Germans put off their advance brought D'Avignon and the others nearer to the Belgians.

It is one of the most difficult, as well as one of the most dangerous operations of war to cover a retreat with success. It makes no difference whether a brigade is covering the retirement of an army corps, or whether one man is assisting the escape of a few others, it is a matter in which courage, judgment, and discretion are equally of value. There is a psychological moment in which to fall back; to retire too soon means failure, one's object is not attained; and to wait too long spells inevitable disaster to oneself.

Shot by shot Bob emptied his magazine. Since the Germans were no longer visible, he fired at the empty car; and the sound of the bullets, as they rattled into the bonnet, or struck the framework of the chassis, was sufficient in itself to make von Hiegler and his friends think it advisable to keep their distance.

Presently, from away back upon the road, there came a great shout, that was not so far from a cheer. Bob, looking back, saw that D'Avignon

and his daughter had been sighted by the Belgians. As for Leconte, he was waddling along like an overfed and agitated duck, throwing his arms about him in much the same manner as that bird will flap its wings.

Bob rose to his feet, which were still quite bare, and ran for life itself. He heard von Hiegler's voice distinctly, raised high in excitement. The boy hastened forward, nearly doubled in half, running as a man will who is under fire. And even as he ran, von Hiegler's bullets, one after the other, came singing past his ears.

The Belgian soldiers were now not two hundred paces away. They were still shouting wildly and pointing towards the east. Bob, looking in that direction, beheld to his amazement and consternation a large party of horsemen, galloping across country towards the road. Though these men were still some distance away, it was quite easy to recognize them as a regiment of Prussian Uhlans.

And now took place a kind of threefold race. D'Avignon, Désirée, and Leconte had already joined the Belgians. Bob, following the roadway, ran as fast as his legs could carry him. Von Hiegler hastened in pursuit, accompanied by two brother officers, all that remained of the occupants of the car. The Uhlans, riding at breakneck speed across the level, marshy fields, hoped, no doubt, to cut off the Englishman.

Of this there was never a chance. The cavalry-

men were too far away; and besides, the ground was so soft that the hoofs of their horses sunk to the fetlocks in mud, and once or twice a horse stumbled and fell, throwing its rider from the saddle.

As Bob approached the Belgians, they cried out to him to fling himself down upon his face. The officer in command had extended his men on either side of the road; and as one man they now raised their rifles to the present.

Upon the instant, Bob threw himself upon the ground. Even as he did so, the "rip" of a volley rang out and carried far across that bleak, deserted marshland, and a swarm of bullets passed over the prostrate figure of the boy with a noise like the wind in the trees.

The Prussian and his friends threw themselves down in the nick of time. To have stood upright before that blast of lead would have spelt certain death.

And no sooner had the sound of the volley died away, than Bob heard D'Avignon calling upon him by name. Without hesitation, springing once more to his feet, he rushed forward; and a moment later found himself in the midst of friends.

The Belgian officer—a captain with a moustache waxed at the ends—was not a little excited.

"To the château!" he cried. "There's not a moment to lose."

As he spoke he pointed with his drawn sword towards the Uhlans. His meaning was very clear;

if they did not gain the cover afforded by the trees and garden walls around the country-house that stood by the side of the road, they would be ridden down by the German cavalry.

In that last race to the château Providence was on their side. The Uhlans were in considerable force; they outnumbered the Belgians by, at least, two to one. They had managed to extricate themselves from a particularly marshy stretch of country, and were now galloping boot to boot, parallel to the road, when they found themselves cut off by a broad dike, with steep, slimy banks.

Cavalry is not an arm that is effective from a distance. When mounted troops are not used for purposes of reconnoitring, if they cannot hurl themselves in a body upon their enemy, they can do nothing better than get out of range as quickly as they can. A horse is no small target; and it is by no means difficult for a small party of infantry to throw a whole cavalry brigade into confusion.

No sooner did the Belgians realize that they would not be called upon to receive a charge of cavalry, than they opened fire with a will. As for the Uhlans, they stood not upon the order of their going, but rode off to the east, the same way as they had come, with more than one riderless horse galloping in their midst.

And all this time von Hiegler lay flat upon his face on the roadside, not daring to lift a hand. Without doubt there was but one thing that saved him from being captured, then and there: a second

and a smaller body of German cavalry had appeared upon the road itself, coming from the direction of Bruges. Antwerp had fallen, and the dreaded Uhlans swarmed in all the countryside like the locusts of the Plague. They were spreading right and left in advance of the German armies, which were then pouring down, in many parallel columns, upon the frontier of France—the low-lying country that stretches from the coast to the great coal-fields in the valley of the Sambre.

"To the château!" cried the Belgian captain. "There's no time to lose."

Leaving behind a small rear-guard, the party retired in haste. One of the soldiers hoisted D'Avignon upon his back; whilst another, with many a jest that was not altogether in the best of taste, pushed Monsieur Leconte from behind so violently that the fat man, gasping for breath, cried out to be left alone.

As they approached the château, they were able to see that it was a building of no little interest to the antiquarian. It was, indeed, one of the old frontier posts of Flanders, and is known to this day by its old name, the Corps de Garde, or watch-house. The original building was no more than a signal tower, to which had been added, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, a kind of guard-room or keep. Later still, the owner had built himself a small modern house; so that the net result was, perhaps, one of the most quaint and singular habitations it is possible to imagine.

The Belgian soldiers reached the Corps de Garde in the nick of time. It was then about midday. The party of Uhlans, which had followed up the retreat upon the road, was not more than a quarter of a mile distant when the Belgians opened fire upon them from the garden walls.

The Germans fell back in disorder, but only to be rejoined by the regiment which had ridden round the dike. Soon afterwards they were reinforced by a third party, which came from the direction of the east; so that, before three o'clock in the afternoon, it had come about that the château was surrounded by, at least, a thousand Germans.

The Belgian captain proved himself not only a brave man but a soldier who knew his business. He had only a hundred and twenty men with which to defend the building. He posted sections on every front, under the command of sous-officiers, and made such hasty dispositions for defence as were possible within the limited time at his disposal.

In the meanwhile D'Avignon and his daughter, Bob Cunningham and Monsieur Leconte, had made their way to the château, which they found quite deserted. All the doors were locked, the windows protected by bars. In consequence, it was some time before Bob was able to break open the back door of the modern part of the building. Thence, finding his way to the hall, he drew back the bolts and admitted Désirée, her father, and Leconte.

There was every evidence that the place had been

evacuated in haste. Indeed, the Germans had spread such terror throughout the northern parts of France that there were few who were willing to remain and face the Teuton in his hour of triumph. Every room was in a state of great confusion. In the dining-room breakfast remained untouched upon the table. The occupants had apparently left that very morning.

When Monsieur Leconte beheld the breakfast things he rubbed his hands together and rolled his somewhat bulbous eyes. Then with extraordinary alacrity he flung off his overcoat, seated himself at the table, and fell to upon a cold joint and certain small Dutch cheeses that resembled ripe tomatoes.

Soon afterwards Bob left his friends in the dining-room, to join the Belgian captain in the garden. Desultory firing was then taking place on all sides of the house. The Uhlans had dismounted, and were advancing in close formation across the low-lying, marshy fields.

"You can hold your own?" asked Bob.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders. "It is not possible," said he; "we are outnumbered. I am confident my men can keep them off as long as it is daylight; but when darkness comes, monsieur, it will be another matter. We are not strong enough to hold them."

"They will want food," said Bob. "They may fall back to their own supply column, which is probably several miles to the north."

"Either they will do that," said the officer, "or

else they will assault the château, hoping to find provisions here."

"There is a good stock of food in the larder," said Bob. "I have seen it myself—enough for your men, at any rate, but hardly enough for the Germans."

The Captain laughed. "They will have to fight for every crust," said he. "Whatever happens, I am determined never to surrender."

At that he returned to the firing-line, quick in all his movements, and apparently well pleased with himself and the world at large. He was one of those light-hearted, dapper little men, who sometimes, when occasion demands, are capable of extremely gallant deeds.

All that afternoon the ceaseless rattle of musketry continued on every side of the Corps de Garde. Hour by hour the Belgians held their assailants at bay. The Germans were not able to advance nearer than six hundred paces from the garden walls. More than once they attempted to rush the position, but on each occasion they were driven back with loss.

The night came gradually, but with inevitable precision. The bleak, deserted landscape faded slowly in the shadows and the white mists that drifted, like great, silent ghosts, in the valley of the Yser. The night was cold—and seemed colder than it was, by reason of the dampness of the air. Though the rivers and canals had not yet overflowed their banks, pools of water lay here and there

in the fields, and many of the by-lanes had been converted into quagmires.

Monsieur Leconte was always deeply concerned with his own personal comfort. Having eaten as much as he could—which was about four times as much as an ordinary person—he lit the drawing-room fire, which chanced to be already laid. Around this the three fugitives seated themselves, Désirée in the middle, her father and Leconte on either side.

For more than an hour no one spoke, whilst the room grew darker and darker. Bob, who felt it his duty to be present when there was fighting to be done, was somewhere in the garden.

Not until darkness had set in did the firing cease. There followed a silence that was like that of the grave, which was difficult, indeed, to bear.

Suddenly the door opened, and there entered Bob Cunningham and the Captain.

"I am sorry to disturb you," said the officer, "but we must defend the house itself."

Leconte got to his feet. On occasions he could be remarkably agile.

"They have attacked?" he asked.

"They will attack," said the other. "Of that I have not the least doubt in the world. We must be prepared for an assault."

The Captain went out, and soon afterwards returned with his men. Without delay they set to work placing the house in a state of defence, making loopholes in the walls, barricading the

doors and windows. The Belgian soldiers were already veterans after ten weeks of war. They went about their work in silence and with a will.

When the task was completed, sentries were posted in the rooms both of the modern dwelling and the mediæval watch-tower. And then it was that the larder was raided by these half-famished soldiers in such a manner that within half an hour not a morsel of food remained.

They lay down to sleep as if nothing unusual were about to happen. Indeed, to them war had become a kind of grim necessity. Day by day they marched and joked and slept, even as they fought, with their lives in their hands, not knowing whether the morrow would bring forth Victory or Death.

At about two o'clock in the morning, Désirée D'Avignon was awakened from her sleep by a piercing blast from a cavalry trumpet. At the same time, a loud, guttural German cheer rent the silence of the night. The girl went to the door of the room in which she had been sleeping, in time to see Bob Cunningham dash like a madman down the passage, a revolver in his hand.

"Keep to your room!" he cried to her as he passed. "Keep to your room! The Uhlans have attacked."

CHAPTER XXIV

The Assault

To describe the conflict that took place that grey and dismal morning about the walls of the old Flemish watch-tower would be a task not easy to accomplish. It was a struggle of Titans; a conflict that recalled the days of the Paladins of old. It is a strange thing that modern warfare should have reverted to the Middle Ages. Hour by hour, men fought hand to hand.

The Germans, by sheer weight of numbers, battered down the front door, and forced their way into the hall of the modern house. There, all was uproar, turmoil, and confusion. Belgians and Prussians fought like savage beasts. When the magazines of their rifles had been emptied they fought with the naked bayonet, or used their weapons as clubs. The groans of the dying and the wounded were smothered by wild, frantic shouts and the ceaseless shuffling of scores of restless feet.

Soon after daybreak the Belgians fell back to the watch-tower and the keep. Many of their comrades had fallen into the hands of the enemy; others lay silent and motionless in the rooms and passages of

the modern house. The Captain was not able to muster more than half the men who had been with him the night before. As for Désirée and Leconte, they had been forced to seek refuge in a small room, circular in shape, at the very top of the tower. There they were joined by Bob, who, despite his wounded arm, had taken part in the conflict, discharging his revolver at point-blank range upon the struggling mass of the enemy.

"It goes well?" she asked, coming towards him with a white face and hands clasped together.

"There is little hope," said Bob, who could not even attempt to look cheerful.

"We must escape!" let out Leconte. "We must escape at once!"

"There is no way of escape," said Bob. "We are run to earth—like rabbits snared in a warren. For all that, we should be able to hold our own for hours. The keep is much easier to defend than the more modern part of the building. The walls are very strong; the windows quite small, and shaped like loopholes."

"But they outnumber us!" exclaimed Leconte. "They are at least ten to one!"

"Numbers," said Bob, "will not count for so much as you think. Down below, in the archway of the keep, there is only room for five men to fight abreast. As I have said, I think we shall be able to hold out for some time. At any rate, we have one thing to be thankful for: there is no artillery against us."

"But in the end," cut in Leconte, "they will starve us out."

On occasions, when not actually faced by danger, Monsieur Leconte could prove himself a man of courage. On the other hand, when the bullets were singing about his ears, or the great shells whining in the air, he was very far from a hero. But if he dreaded one thing in all this world more than any other, most certainly it was starvation. As he said the words, he looked at Bob, consternation stamped on every feature of his face.

"You are quite right," said the boy; "in the end, they will starve us out. If no help comes, we shall be obliged to surrender."

It was then that the first assault upon the keep was launched, with the wonted fury of the Prussian arms. The cavalrymen, relying upon their sabres, hurled themselves with unquestionable heroism into the breech of the old-fashioned archway, where they were locked and jammed together in indescribable confusion.

It stands much to the credit of von Hiegler that it was he himself who led the attack. There is no doubt that the Prussian captain had planned the operation, as, indeed, he had gathered the Uhlans together to surround the Corps de Garde. As the fight continued, he worked himself up into a kind of warlike fury. Spurred forward by bitter feelings of disappointment and revenge, he was resolved to risk all in an attempt to capture the boy who had stood so often in his way.

More than once Bob Cunningham caught sight of him in the midst of the swaying, struggling mass of human beings, where the blue coats of the Belgian soldiers were mingled with the Prussian grey.

Towards nine o'clock both sides fell back exhausted. There was a lull in the combat; men needed time in which to breathe. There is a limit to the courage of even the bravest men, as there is a limit to the strength of the most powerful brutes. And for seven immortal hours these soldiers had been both men and brutes in one; they had fought as heroes and as tigers; they had risked their lives to save their comrades; whereas, in regard to the enemy, they had neither asked for quarter nor received it. Neither side had been ordered to retire; the fighting ceased, on the sudden, as if by mutual consent.

Bob encountered D'Avignon half-way up the winding stairs of the watch-tower.

"It was magnificent!" he cried. "For all their numbers, they could not force an entrance."

Without a word the Doctor laid a hand upon the boy's shoulder. His voice was quite low and very serious. He had just then come from attending to the wounded.

"I have bad news," said he.

Without another word he turned and began to climb the stairs, placing one of his crutches under an arm, and assisting himself by means of an iron railing that ascended the narrow, winding staircase.

At the top they entered the room where Désirée and Leconte were waiting. This room was wholly without furniture. The girl was seated on the floor, before an empty fire-place, looking very woe-begone and tired. As for Leconte, he paced to and fro with his arms alternately folded on his chest or clasped behind his back. He was so palpably nervous that he could not keep still a moment.

D'Avignon went straight to the little window that gave upon the north. There, he pointed towards a white road that stretched across the low-lands as far as the eye could reach.

Upon this road, moving slowly forward, there could be seen approaching something that resembled a small two-wheeled cart. It was, however, no such thing; for it was drawn by six horses, and followed by a kind of wagon. Even at that distance it could be mistaken for nothing else but a German field-gun.

Bob looked, and then drew in a deep breath and remained quite motionless. In his heart he knew quite well that the little garrison was lost. This single piece of modern artillery was enough to batter the old mediæval watch-tower to the dust.

He remained standing there for several seconds, wondering what he should do. The Belgians had no artillery. The gun, from a position of absolute safety, could shell the Corps de Garde until not one stone remained upon another. Neither would a counter-attack, or sally, offer much prospect of

success. The Germans were in too great force, and could hardly be taken by surprise.

Bob turned to D'Avignon, and their eyes met.

"We are in a bad way," said he.

"It will no longer be safe in the tower," answered the Doctor. "The building will be destroyed—piecemeal."

"There is a dungeon," said Bob; "I saw the steps leading down to it."

"We must go there," said the other. "It will be safer for my daughter."

Together they went down the stairs. The tower consisted of four stories—four circular rooms, one above the other. The room on the ground floor, which was crowded with Belgian soldiers, adjoined the keep—the old guard-house—where the struggle had taken place. The majority of the wounded had been carried up the stairs to the first floor, where the Doctor had worked throughout the morning. The Captain, whom they encountered at the foot of the stairs, explained that, since the tower itself was no longer safe, he intended to have the wounded carried down to the dungeon, where they would be out of danger of the shells.

Fortunately the dungeon, though dark, was spacious. Many of the soldiers had candles, which they were wont to use in their "dug-outs" in the trenches; and by means of these that damp, unhealthy chamber was converted into a brilliantly illumined hospital ward, where it was possible for the Doctor to continue with his work.

Désirée, as we know, had some knowledge in giving First Aid to the wounded; and for half an hour, assisted by Leconte, and following her father's directions, she did all that was within her power to assist those unhappy sufferers. There was, however, little that they could do, since the Doctor had neither surgical instruments nor drugs.

In the meantime the lull in the conflict continued. On the German side there was no movement, though once or twice they heard von Hiegler's voice shouting his orders to his men. The Uhlans had established themselves under cover of the garden walls, and in a long ditch that skirted an orchard of apple and cherry trees.

Cunningham and the Belgian officer ascended the stairs to the top story of the tower, whence they were able to obtain an extensive view of the surrounding country. The field-gun had now disappeared from the road. No doubt it was already in position, hidden in one of the many clumps of trees that dotted the landscape between the winding river and the sand-dunes fringing the coast.

Presently the gun spoke, with a dull, thudding sound that carried far, rolling in echoes like a peal of thunder across that bleak, deserted marsh-land. And then the shell, with a long, plaintive howl, flew high above the tower, and plunged without bursting into the midst of a great stretch of mud on the northern bank of the river.

A second shell burst short, with a loud explosion, in the orchard, the jagged fragments cutting the

branches from the cherry trees as a man might whip down thistles with a cane.

"Come!" cried the officer. "There's no sense in staying here."

Hardly had the words left his lips than a shell crashed into the room beneath them with an explosion that shook the tower to its foundations.

The Captain, hurrying down the stairs, with Bob close at his heels, found that a hole had been made in the wall, at least five feet in diameter, and fragments of brick and mortar littered the floor. Even whilst they were there, the fourth shell struck the roof of the modern building, sending a shower of broken slates and splintered rafters into the garden.

It is not necessary to describe in any detail that merciless bombardment. It was a one-sided business at the best. The Germans themselves lay under cover, whilst the field-gun prepared the way for their advance. It is the maxim of war that artillery should be used to shake the nerves of a defending force, in order that the infantry assault may have the better chance of success.

In this case, the odds were heavily against the Belgians. Not only had they to suffer artillery fire to which they had no means of replying, but they were crowded together like a flock of sheep, with no chance of taking open order. The Corps de Garde was doomed.

Shot by shot, the old building crumbled to the dust. The whole roof was blown away; and then

the walls on the second floor fell inwards, so that the upper part of the building collapsed like a house of cards.

All this while, to those in the dungeon below, the noise was deafening. It was as if they found themselves in the very vortex of a thunder-storm. To make oneself heard, it was necessary to shout. To the physical pain endured by those who had been wounded was added something that was near to mental anguish. Every one of them was in danger of being buried alive.

Presently, the trumpet sounded again. As before, its loud blast was followed by a German cheer. The Uhlans, led by von Hiegler, sword in hand, hurled themselves across the intervening space between the orchard and the tower.

The Belgians, who were ready for them, met them at the bayonet point; and once again, these bitter foes became locked together in the arms of Death. The shell-fire ceased, as the storming party rushed into the breach. In the semi-darkness of the keep, the air was foul with the smell of cordite, whilst men's voices were raised and mingled together in a wild confusion of cries of pain, passion, triumph, and savage oaths.

Conflicts such as this are seldom of long duration. Human beings are not machines. When men fight with modern arms at point-blank range, before long one side or the other must give way. And now, as before, it was the Germans who rolled back like a spent wave upon a shingle beach.

It was then they heard the voice of von Hiegler once again. He was rallying his men.

"If we can't dig them out," he cried, "we'll burn them out. Send back word to the gun."

Soon after that the bombardment began again. Shell after shell struck the defenceless building. It was as if this crumbling ancient fortress took its punishment as a martyr suffers in the flames. It died in silence—heroic to the last.

The modern part of the building, which contained most wood and inflammable material, was the first to be set on fire. In a score of places flames burst through the roof, whilst clouds of black, rolling smoke gathered above, to drift away upon the wind. Ten minutes of this, and all was at an end.

The wind had changed to the south. Inch by inch the flames approached the keep. There was no way of escape. The château was surrounded. The tower was practically in ruins. Even those in the dungeon were in danger of being suffocated where they lay.

Accompanied by Bob, the officer in command mounted the stairs to the ruined summit of the tower—which was now no higher than the level of the second floor. Beyond all doubt, he recognized himself for lost, and had already drawn his sword with the intention of handing it over to the Prussian.

In full view of the enemy, the gallant fellow appeared in the midst of the debris that had once

been the fortress he had held so stoutly against such fearful odds. As he did so, a white flag was hoisted in the orchard, and von Hiegler came from among the trees.

"Monsieur," said he in his atrocious French, "I call upon you to surrender."

"On what terms?" asked the Belgian.

The Prussian paused a moment. "You are entitled to the honours of war," said he. "You yourself, monsieur, will be allowed your parole; your men will be permitted to retain their arms. Only the Englishman must surrender without condition."

The Captain turned to Bob. "What must I do?" said he.

Bob Cunningham smiled.

"The matter is in your hands," he answered. "You have done your duty—more than your duty."

The Captain looked perplexed. There are many kinds of tragedy in war; and, perhaps, to surrender to a hated enemy is the greatest tragedy of all. There is no doubt that in another minute the curtain would have been run down, the die would have been cast, once and for all, had not at that moment the attention of all three been attracted by a peculiar purring sound which came from immediately overhead.

Looking upward, they beheld a great cloud-bank, snow-white on the under side, and streaked with black above. On a sudden, through this shot something little that was like a bird.

It dropped lower and lower, with incredible rapidity, working in a series of circles which became smaller and smaller. And presently they were able to recognize a Farman biplane, which passed so close above them that they could see quite distinctly the bright colours of the Union Jack painted on the wings.

The biplane contained a pilot and an observer. It was the latter who shouted to them wildly as he passed, waving, of all things on earth, an enormous "Teddy bear". They could not hear what he said, or tried to say, by reason of the droning of the engine; but he made his meaning clear enough, that they had some reason to hope, by throwing his strange and woolly mascot into the very midst of the Germans.

Despite everything, Bob Cunningham could not refrain from laughter. As for the Belgian captain, he stood bolt upright in the position of a soldier, and answered von Hiegler, as one man to another.

"You can attack again," said he. "We have some reason to believe that our friends are not so far away."

Von Hiegler, turning upon his heel with a guttural oath, pointed with his sword towards the burning house.

"*Vorwärts!*" he cried. "For the Fatherland!"

CHAPTER XXV

The Last Post

THE last attack upon the Corps de Garde was delivered with fury and determination. The ancient watch-tower was now reduced to ruins; the modern building was in flames. No doubt von Hiegler realized that there was little time to spare. At any rate, he ordered frantic and repeated endeavours to be made to capture the keep. His loud voice was audible from time to time, exhorting his men to press home the attack, to force an entrance at every cost.

And if the truth be told, the Belgian soldiers had fought themselves to a finish; they had lost half their number, killed and wounded, and those who remained were thoroughly exhausted. There is no question that, even then, at the eleventh hour, the château would have fallen, had it not been for the fire, which spread like running water.

When the Prussian had given orders for the modern building to be destroyed by inflammable shells, he had not foreseen that it would be necessary to repeat the assault so soon. The flames had now gained the extremity of the archway where the

struggle was taking place, so that men fought hand to hand in an atmosphere charged heavily with smoke. Also, to reach the keep itself, the Uhlans had to pass within a few feet of a raging furnace, the heat from which was quite unbearable.

Nor were those in the dungeon below immune from this new danger. The steps which led down to the place where the wounded had been gathered together, were smothered in soot and red-hot embers, driven thither by the wind. The air had become so thick with smoke that their eyes smarted, and several of the wounded, who should have remained quite still, were shaken violently by fits of coughing.

D'Avignon saw at once that the wounded must be moved. One by one they were carried to the top of the steps, where they found themselves in close proximity to the very place where the conflict was at its fiercest.

There was nowhere they could go but to the summit of the ruined tower. And here they were fully exposed to the wind, which had now become quite cold, in spite of the brightness of the sun that was sinking towards the west.

Huddled together, without hope in their hearts, they were like those who find themselves upon a sinking ship driven by the encroaching waters to a point of vantage, where there is not space enough to hold them. Many had been so severely hurt that they were but semi-conscious; and these, perhaps, were the better off, since they were un-

able to realize the terrible predicament in which they were.

Désirée D'Avignon was master of herself. She had never dreamed that this modern world—a world of charity and Christian kindness—could bring forth such unholy terrors. Scores of wounded, lying crowded together upon a bed of shattered masonry and brickwork, were at the mercy of the German field-gun that lay hidden, somewhere to the west, like a great lurking beast of prey. If any comfort were to be found in a situation so fraught with danger, it lay in the fact that the gunners were hardly likely to reopen fire whilst a great number of Uhlans were still fighting for possession of the keep.

These thoughts caused the girl to turn her eyes in the direction whence the shells had come. And then it was that she saw quite clearly the gun itself emerge from a belt of fir trees and make off towards the road.

She could not at first understand the meaning of this sudden and unexpected movement; but a moment later, on turning her eyes towards the south, the explanation was apparent.

There, extending east and west, from the sand-dunes over the marsh-land as far as the eye could reach, was line upon line of cavalry, moving forward at a canter.

The girl stood motionless, like one transfigured, unable to move her eyes. The spectacle was inspiring; and when she realized, as in a flash, that

these were British cavalry hastening to their rescue, her heart beat so violently that she thought she was about to faint.

It was at that moment that Bob came from the keep below. He was black with smoke, and the clothes he had procured in Antwerp resembled those of a tramp. As he admitted afterwards, he was about to tell her that the Belgians were giving way, that in a few minutes all that remained to them of the Corps de Garde would be in the hands of the enemy. But before he had time to speak she seized him by the arm, and pointed excitedly towards the Yser.

"Look there!" she cried. "The British!"

Even as the words left her lips, from somewhere in the distance the voice of a gun spoke like a thunder-clap. A shell screamed overhead, and burst in the very belt of trees whence the German gunners had shelled the Corps de Garde.

A moment later, several batteries were in action. The air was alive with shells, and the sound of the artillery was almost deafening. The guns fired so close upon one another that the reports made one long, continuous rumbling sound, not unlike that which is caused by an empty barrel when rolled upon hard, uneven ground—only a thousand times more loud.

The British cavalry came forward in a headlong, breakneck charge. At the river they split up into several parties, which crossed at the various bridges and fords. On the northern bank they re-formed,

and then once again came forward at the gallop with a cheer.

Von Hiegler saw his danger far too late. A British aeroplane, dropping suddenly from the clouds, discovered the Uhlans' horses, which were presently stampeded by the accuracy of the British gun-fire.

The Belgians — who were still fighting with tenacity, as men will with their backs to a wall —were at first quite at a loss to explain how it was that the attack had ceased so suddenly. As one man the Germans drew off, and the Corps de Garde was saved.

The Uhlans retired to the place where they had left their horses; and on arriving there, and finding that the terrified animals had been scattered far and wide, they raced on foot for the road.

They had never a chance of escape. A direct hit was scored by the British gunners, and the German gun lay by the wayside, a piece of crumpled steel. Parties of British cavalry rode completely round their flanks, and beat them back in a body towards the château they had left. And there they came under both frontal and enfilade fire from two battalions of infantry which had crossed the river lower down.

Some surrendered on the spot. Others were shot down in endeavouring to escape. A small party, with which was Captain von Hiegler himself, endeavoured to make a stand in the neighbourhood of the orchard; and of these not one was left alive.

That night, when a full moon cast a pale, uncertain light upon the bleak and lonely marshland on the northern bank of the Yser, Bob Cunningham found the body of the man, who had been his enemy throughout these long adventurous weeks, lying where he had fallen, with his drawn sword in his hand, and a small black hole in the breast of his blue-grey tunic, quite near to the spot where the Iron Cross depended from his neck. It was by the silent, lazy Yser that the Last Post sounded over the graves of friend and foe alike.

Later, on the same evening, Cunningham stood before Sir Henry Cole, the Brigadier who had dispatched him upon that fateful errand in the valley of the Aisne, and whose brigade had arrived at the eleventh hour.

The General smiled as he handed to Bob a long blue envelope, which had already been opened.

"I told you," said he, "that I hoped to get you a commission; and there it is. You have been gazetted a second lieutenant in the Wessex Fusiliers."

Bob was racking his brains to think of what he ought to say, when the General relieved him of all responsibility in the matter by continuing, in the same quiet, unemotional voice:

"That was before I had seen the papers you handed to me this evening. Had you not captured them and brought them safely from Antwerp, the result might have been terribly serious. You will be mentioned in dispatches; and I think I can

safely tell you that you will be in the almost unique position of joining your regiment as a recruit officer with either the Distinguished Service Order or the Military Cross."

"Sir," said Bob, whose face had suddenly become flushed, "I can't thank you enough."

Strange to relate, Sir Henry frowned.

"My boy," said he, "I don't want you to thank me. Don't let it give you a swelled head; that's all my advice. In the meantime, you are to have six weeks' sick leave in England. As an old friend I have written to your mother, and told her you are coming home. I thought she would like to know."

Bob saluted and went out. And as he did so he felt that, at last, he was a soldier in more than name.

. . . . . .

Three days afterwards a certain ship, carrying as passengers a great number of wounded and refugees, crossed from Dunkirk to Dover. It was on the well-deck of this ship that Bob Cunningham encountered his old friend Private Sharp, who was also going home on leave.

Sharp took his pipe from his mouth, and listened to the whole story of the defence of the Corps de Garde and the death of Hauptmann von Hiegler.

"Well," said he, when Bob had finished, "I reckon he ain't much loss—except, of course, to Kultur. And 'ow do you find yerself?"

At such a familiar question as this Bob thought it best to mention the matter of his commission.

Sharp gasped, then grinned; and then, as if he had received an electric shock, straightened to attention.

"Beggin' yer pardon, sir," said he, "I wish you luck. I've come acrost many orficers in my time, and a lot on 'em real good uns; but I never met one I'd rather serve under than yourself—if you'll excuse me speaking, sir, for the last time, as I might say, as man to man."

And that, coming as it did from Private Sharp, was something in the nature of a compliment. At any rate, it was Bob's modesty, let us suppose, that sent him back to the upper deck, to Désirée D'Avignon and her father. They also were on their way to England. But that is neither here nor there.

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